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Textual preferences
the queer afterlives of childhood reading

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Textual Preferences:
The Queer Afterlives of Childhood Reading

by

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Abstract

Textual Preferences: The Queer Afterlives of Childhood Reading asks how childhood and adolescent reading, and experiences-with-books more broadly, contribute to queer self-fashioning. Drawing on original oral histories gathered from ten UK-based, self-identified LGBTQ adults born between 1949 and 1981, it maps from memories of books and reading these narrators' various material and textual investments, affiliations, identifications and practices. In so doing, it establishes a corpus of fourteen texts of particular significance to these narrators, proposing an alternative history of book-use and reading with specific resonance for LGBTQ individuals. Over four chapters, *Textual Preferences* examines the book as material object and the haptic and bodily aspects of reading; the spaces and places of reading and book culture; the various reading strategies of these ten narrators; and the intersection between books, reading and the strange temporalities of queer experience. Informed by current work in book history, the history of reading and queer studies, it positions oral history as a productive methodology for research in these fields; it additionally intervenes in oral history praxis, arguing that attention to the paraverbal and nonverbal aspects of the interview can reveal much about the relations between the book and the (queer) reading subject. Constituting a rich body of material otherwise at risk of remaining unarticulated and unrecorded, the reading histories and memories on which this study draws form a unique aural and textual archive for future scholarly use, which will be preserved by the University of Roehampton.

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Fig. 1. Doctor Smith and Doctor Jakes, illustrated by Ruth Gervis, in Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes* (1936. Puffin, 1983), p. 183.

Introduction
A list of books loved in childhood

"[A] list of the books that someone most loved when he or she was a child might be as revealing of his or her psychology as a Rorschach test", suggests the poet Stephen Spender in Antonia Fraser's 1992 anthology, *The Pleasure of Reading* (4). For Spender, what is 'revealed' is something of his adult sexual orientation and gender identity. "The fact that I preferred Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* to the military tales of G. A. Henty, though I never quite sank to the depths of Barrie's *Peter Pan*," confesses Spender, "is a sure sign that in later life I would prove to be a Cissy" (4). The author Lee Lynch opens her 1990 essay "Cruising the Libraries", an account of her evolution as a reader and writer of lesbian literature, with a reading list of her own. "Little Ms. Muffet? Phooey. Cinderella? You have to be kidding", she writes. "Maybe Prince Charming, but he was pretty innocuous, as well as male [...] Nancy Drew? Now she had promise. Dr. Doolittle [sic]? Absolutely" (39). Lynch recalls reading in childhood as a kind of quest, a search to find someone – anyone – "in literature like little Lee" (39). But how are these memories of reading to be understood? In what sense is RM Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) more "Cissy" than "the military tales of G.A. Henty" – but somehow less so than JM Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911)? How to explain the frisson that attaches here to Nancy Drew's suggested "promise"? Or the reasons Doctor Dolittle – as Lynch admits, "a bumbling, middle-aged man" – might be more "like" a small tomboyish girl than either Little Miss Muffet or Cinderella (39)?

Borne of a fascination with these moments of transaction between childhood reading and LGBTQ selfhood, this thesis argues that books and reading are intimately bound up with queer experience, with what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or a person of otherwise non-normative sexual orientation and/or gender identity, from the earliest textual encounters onwards. "Before love", as Valerie Rohy puts it, "there was the library; before intimacy, before identity, before

community, there were books" (104). Through close attention to original oral histories of reading gathered from ten UK-based, self-identified LGBTQ narrators, born between 1949 and 1981, I set out to record and examine the various ways in which queer subjectivity might be produced, revealed, informed by, or reconstructed within childhood and adolescent reading and experiences-with-books. In eighteen one-to-one interviews, including eight follow up interviews in which we discussed rereading(s) of books of particular significance, I co-created with these narrators a corpus of fourteen key texts in total, alongside a rich array of readerly behaviours, practices and examples of book-use. Asking how we are shaped by reading, and how we shape the books we cleave to in return, *Textual Preferences* is the first full-length study of the interplay between books, reading and queer identity in the lives of 'everyday' LGBTQ readers.

"Homosexuality was a thing in books"

That books and reading contribute to queer self-fashioning is well established. In 1902, Edward Carpenter published his commonplace book of homosexual desire, *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship*, an assemblage of extracts ranging from the ancient Greeks to Carpenter's contemporary, nineteenth century American poet Walt Whitman. By 1984, lesbian supporters of the Defend Gay's the Word campaign – a response to Operation Tiger, the customs raid on the London lesbian and gay bookshop which saw the seizure of several thousands of pounds' worth of valuable stock – state in a briefing note that their experience of coming to know their sexuality through novels is "almost a cliché now" ("Briefing note 6" n. pag.). For over a century, books, reading and queer identity have been tightly bound together; the textual and the sexual connected in what Rohy calls a "specific, overdetermined relation", which persists, she argues, throughout "the long twentieth century, from the sexologists' first major publications in the 1880s to the present Internet age" (105). I provide some examples of this relationship between reading, books and queerness, but also suggest some ways in which the dominant

narratives about *which* books play a role in this self-fashioning, and *how* that self-fashioning takes place, might obscure a more nuanced story about the complex relations and reciprocities between LGBTQ individuals, books and the act of reading.

For LGBTQ individuals, books can be crucial sources of information and knowledge, providing the language and definitions many readers grappling with their emerging sexuality have so desperately sought. In the face of historic queer invisibility and lack of representation, "reading", as Rohy puts it, "takes on a special urgency" (109). Rohy quotes a passage from Frances Rummell's *Diana: A Strange Autobiography* (1939) – whose very title hints at a coded queerness, "strange" so often being a synonym for gay or lesbian, as in Gayle Wilhelm's lesbian pulp novel *The Strange Path* (1953) – which dramatises such reading. "I read everything I could find", the pseudonymous Diana explains, "which might increase my understanding of myself" (qtd. in Rohy 113). In three languages and mixing genres indiscriminately, "[l]aboriously, often with a great French or German dictionary, I read Hirschfeld, Freud, Westermarck, Krafft-Ebing, Gide and Ellis..." (qtd. in Rohy 113). Even when such research projects proved less than illuminating, readers persisted. As Alison Hennegan puts it in her 1988 essay "On Becoming a Lesbian Reader" (of which more shortly), coming to an understanding of lesbian sexuality, and of herself, took "most of my adolescence" and "most of my early womanhood" (168):

> One of the reasons it took so long was that my usual allies let me down. Like many children born to elderly parents, books were my chief companions, my most important source of knowledge. Yet in them I could find no explanation of the thing I sought, even if I sometimes found the thing itself. (168)

This cultural silence surrounding same-sex desire between women in the early 1960s is highlighted by Rebecca Jennings in her 2007 study *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*. Jennings cites Nina Jenkins, one of the participants in the Hall Carpenter Oral History Project, the UK's largest collection of gay and lesbian life stories. As Jenkins puts it of her own 1960s girlhood, "I don't ever recall words being used. In fact I'm not sure they

were" (6). As terms, Jenkins elaborates, "gay hadn't been invented", "homosexuality was a thing in books", while "lesbian was like a derogatory term that you hardly ever heard; and other people used things like poofs and queers" (6). "I think there was just an expectation," she concludes, "that there were people like us and there were other people" (6). Nevertheless, *homosexuality was a thing in books*. Jenkins uses the phrase to point to the distance between a pathologised, medico-scientific labelling of same-sex relations between men, and her own lived experience as a fledgling lesbian looking to name her nascent desires. Homosexuality, in this instance, could be read as occurring only "in books", in contrast to being visible in Jenkins' everyday life; at the same time, books enable the formulation of the very concept of homosexuality as 'a thing'. Even at its most stretched or extended relation, reading remains implicated in the construction of non-normative sexuality, as books contain what cannot be accommodated openly by other means.

The connection between books, reading and identity figures in a range of sources – both non-fictional and fictional. Here is Stephen Gordon, protagonist of Radclyffe Hall's controversial 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, browsing in her father's study after his death. Oddly drawn to her father's "special book-case", she unlocks it for the first time to find a "row of books standing behind the others", as-yet-unexamined, on a shelf near the bottom of the case (207). "The next moment", writes Hall, Stephen "had one of these in her hand and was looking at the name of the author: Krafft Ebing – she had never heard of that author before" (207). It is a book with a particular message to impart: "for there on its margins were notes in her father's small, scholarly hand and she saw that her own name appeared in those notes" (207). It is this reading experience that reveals to Stephen her 'true self'. Addressing her father, she declares "'You knew! All this time you knew this thing, but because of your pity you wouldn't tell me" (207). This is the paradigmatic scene of queer reading: the encounter with a book in which a reader finds elucidated the concept of same-sex sexuality for the

first time. Able to name their own desires, readers are, by extension, able to bring their own selves, their own subjectivities into focus. A similar scene is enacted in EM Forster's *Maurice* (1913-14), in which Clive is unable to "forget his emotion at first reading the *Phaedrus.* He saw there his malady described exquisitely, calmly…" (qtd. in Rohy 112).

This "production of the modern self" through "the ordinary act of reading", as Richard Hornsey puts it in his book *The Spiv and the Architect* (2010), has a longer history, tied to the novel form from the eighteenth century onwards (166). Novels, Hornsey argues, "aided the phenomenological process of individuation, as the reading consciousness withdrew from its external environment and into a psychic interiority carved out by internal monologue and private contemplation" (166). But, as the examples from Hall and Forster suggest, and as Hornsey also notes, experiences-with-books and reading provide specific moments of "personal enlightenment" for queer individuals (166). "Oral histories of the early twentieth century", Hornsey observes, "often hinge on a volume of Plato or Edward Carpenter casually discovered in Father's study, that provides a new conceptual language through which to articulate a nascent queer identity" (166). Hornsey cites memories of reading and experiences-with-books articulated in Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks's *Between the Acts: Lives of Homosexual Men, 1885-1967* (1991), in the National Lesbian and Gay Survey's 1993 collection *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and Me,* and Brighton Ourstory Project's *Daring Hearts: Lesbian and Gay Lives of 50s and 60s Brighton* (1992), among others. Here we can see the imbricated relationship between recalled reading experiences, and reading *about* reading, as aspects of these fictional encounters-with-books – Hall's Stephen Gordon reading Krafft-Ebing in her father's study, Forster's Clive reading Plato – recur in the oral accounts of real readers.

For lesbian readers, these recalled reading experiences often centre around one text in particular – Hall's. By attending to LGBTQ readers' memories of other significant

texts and other experiences-with-books, gathered through the original oral histories on which this study is based, *Textual Preferences* complicates and enriches this picture. So embedded is *The Well of Loneliness* as *the* book for lesbian readers, however, that it is frequently referred to as the 'bible of lesbianism' – "[j]okingly, and not so jokingly", as Alison Hennegan puts it in her 1982 introduction to the novel (viii). The puff quote on the cover of my Virago Modern Classics edition, reprinted in 2002, attributes the phrase to the *Irish Times.* Lesbian activists and founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, also refer to it as such in *Lesbian/Woman,* their classic lesbian feminist text from 1972, as Laura Doan and Jay Prosser point out in their 2002 edited collection, *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on* The Well of Loneliness (16). For Jane Rule, writing in 1975, *The Well* is a "'bible or a horror story'" (qtd. in Doan and Prosser 16). Rebecca O'Rourke, in her 1989 study *Reflecting on* The Well of Loneliness suggests of the novel that "[f]or many years it was a bible for lesbians: a source book for behaviour, attitude and dress; a salve for the hurts of the world; an inspiration and example" (116). Partly, this cultural dominance is pragmatic: following its republication in Britain in 1949 (the book was banned on first publication twenty-one years earlier), Hall's novel contained one of the only fictional depictions of same-sex love between women easily available to readers in the post-war period. Reading it was "a rite of passage" for many girls and women (Jennings 32). Jennings quotes reader Eileen Carty, who wrote in to the lesbian magazine *Arena Three* in 1967 to say that "'*The Well* [...] explained "me" to me' in the far off days when the subject was very taboo, and there were certainly no books easily come by" (32). This is a story that is reinscribed in the retelling, however, wearing an endless groove, so that the cultural narrative around books, reading and queer identity is often reduced to an analysis of (lesbian) readers' engagements with Hall's novel, to the exclusion of any other text or bookish encounter. For example, a television documentary first broadcast on the BBC on 27 July 2017, describing the literary landscape for lesbians in the late 1960s and

early 1970s (a generation after Carty's "far off days"), features the following exchange: "We've got one book that was written in 1928, and that was it?" asks presenter Susan Calman. "Yeah. That was it," answers her interviewee, Gill Williamson ("Prejudice and Pride" 11:03-11:07).

In actuality, as Jennings points out, *The Well of Loneliness* was only one of a range of media containing lesbian representation which "proliferated" during this period, from "popular self-help books and psychiatry guides" to other "literary portrayals of lesbianism [...] aimed at an increasingly knowing readership" (3). Amy Tooth Murphy has done much in her doctoral thesis to broaden understanding of the various other kinds of reading lesbians were undertaking in the post-war period, through attention to sources such as the book reviews featured in *Arena Three*, and to unpick readers' perceptions of the novel (Murphy 2012). One reader Murphy interviews, Laura, responds, "'*Well of Loneliness* I thought was the most depressing and miserable book I had ever, ever read. It's a horror! And y'think...[Laughs] 'Well I can't be a lesbian!' [Laughs] 'There's no way! With stuff like that. I didn't fit into that'" (9). But as this demonstrates, even readers who powerfully disidentify with the book, and with its protagonist, are using it as a kind of yardstick or barometer; it will either confer and confirm, or deny and disallow their emerging lesbian identity. Partly, then, the dominance of *The Well of Loneliness,* and, more precisely, the way it works upon readers, is something of a culturally produced mirage. Patently, its transformative effects are not felt by all those who encounter it. Yet this recursive structure of constructing queer identity through reading *about* the construction of queer identity *through reading* (what Rohy calls "[r]eading readers reading readers reading") continues in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, accreting with each generation, so that Stephen Gordon's scene of reading seems to be endlessly replicated by readers of the novel itself (136). These readers in turn reproduce narratives which continue to centre the novel or the constitutive effect of an encounter with one particular book in

texts of their own (of all kinds, including the television documentary and the oral history), for subsequent generations.

Moreover, the story told by historians of sexuality and of reading about the nature of the relationship between books, reading and queerness is at risk of becoming similarly well-worn. As Murphy puts it, Hall's novel "stand[s] for what has come to make up the dominant critical landscape of lesbian literary and cultural history" in twentieth-century Britain (9). One of the only extant research projects I have been able to locate with a specific focus on the relation between reading and lesbian identity – not an oral history project, but a qualitative and quantitative survey – is the project undertaken by the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, which launched a series of cultural surveys beginning in 1986 on – what else – *The Well of Loneliness.* Their aim, writes O'Rourke, was to "[a]ttempt to understand how we use and judge our own cultural roots" (118). The survey, sent out to interested readers of the *LHA Newsletter*, received a range of responses. The youngest reported reading of the novel, for example, was by a ten year old reader who came out some 26 years after reading it, which prompts questions about its afterlife and continued resonance for that particular reader; another reports how her mother "threw it away after tearing it in half"; another describes how she "circled timidly about, browsing" in a bookshop, yet could not summon the courage to request the book (2-5). Responses nevertheless primarily foreground *The Well of Loneliness* as "*the* basic Lesbian novel", as another respondent puts it (5).

Indeed, the revelatory encounter with one emblematic text is often taken as a model for historiographical and personal narratives of coming-to-terms with queer identity through books. In a 2017 blogpost by queer theorist Karen Tongson, in *Public Books'* "The Book That Made Me" series, she revisits her adolescent attachment to Martina Navratilova's 1985 memoir *Martina.* Just as she was becoming conscious of "the faint stirrings of [her] sexual non-normativity", writes Tongson, she developed "an

obsession" with tennis, and with Navratilova herself (n. pag.). Tongson relished the book's "sexual frankness", the tension of attractions and relationships rivalling "taut narratives" of competition on the court: "[t]he combination was titillating to a proto-queer jock" (n. pag.). At the time of reading, however, Tongson remained unaware of what she describes as the book's "queer resonance"; she loved and reread it, she maintained, simply as a tennis fan and admirer of Navratilova's professional accomplishments. These nuances are editorially ironed out: the standfirst steadfastly asserts that Tongson's engagement with Navratilova's autobiography "reveals how one's identity can be transformed from the most unexpected sources – in this case, sports memoir"; *Martina* is "The Book That Made Me: Gay" (n. pag.). Even when readers – such as Tongson – report rather different reading experiences, when they connect their emerging sexuality with the books they are consuming in less direct, more temporally tricky ways, there seems to be something a little myopic about the analysis and framing of these reading experiences: a transaction between one reader and one book, a reading encounter that is structured around one particular model.

But as Spender and Lynch highlight in my opening examples, and indeed, as Tongson points to here, there are other, earlier memories of books, reading and emergent queer identity to uncover and recover, which complicate this already rather involved picture. In *Textual Preferences,* I prise open this "overdetermined" relationship: widening out a discussion of the relationship between LGBTQ readers' conceptions of selfhood, their bookish behaviours, and their reading practices (Rohy 105). What of the reading that takes place earlier in childhood, and its afterlives – for example, rereading or remediation? What of those readers for whom coming to understand their sexuality is a process rather than a revelation, for which no single text is responsible? What of those memories of books and reading that attach to the textual, but are not themselves text-focused – of the materiality of the book-object, of paratext, and of the various spaces in which reading takes place? How do these contribute to

queer self-fashioning? And finally, as several of these sketched-out scenes of reading suggest, what of the pull of existing narrative forms in shaping recalled experiences-with-books, and the instability of the memories from which these recollections are drawn? How might time, queerness and memories of experiences-with-books and reading intersect in the formation of queer selfhood in more complex ways? Many of these issues emerge from the examples I have so far discussed, from other examples of LGBTQ reading I collated during this research, as well as from the original oral histories gathered as part of this study, and yet they have received relatively little critical attention to date.

While not disavowing the singular encounter with a particular book more usually mobilised in discussions of the intersection between queer selfhood and reading, should it appear within my narrators' accounts, nor the sustained research project carried out by the intrepid reader determined to find self-definition through books, my focus is on the whole span of LGBTQ adults' engagements with books in childhood and adolescence; from their earliest encounters with printed matter to their engagements in young adulthood with books they loved, hated, were bored by, or struggled through. *Textual Preferences* aims to uncover a variety of readers' textual and extratextual encounters: the sensed, unarticulated, the misunderstood or not fully understood, the private pleasures of solitary engagements with particular texts, and the community and companionship of discovering other people – fictional or real, authors, characters or readers – in some way, however subtle, like themselves. It asks what LGBTQ adults recall of their *reading* in childhood and adolescence – but also about what they *do with books*.

Recalling childhood reading

To return to Spender and Lynch: their drive to scrutinise childhood reading with a 'queer eye' is an analytic urge I recognise. When I admitted my sexuality to myself, I too

turned to books, nervously skirting the LGBTQ shelves in the library and the bookshop, searching my memories of earlier reading for some 'sign' that my same-sex desire could be 'revealed' through attention to my childhood and adolescent attachments; reading my own reading history backwards in an attempt to uncover a pattern that would retrospectively legitimate my present. I made lists of characters I recalled – or thought I recalled – having felt peculiarly drawn to: Mrs MacNally's Maureen, the capable teenage babysitter in Shirley Hughes's *An Evening at Alfie's* (1984); Enid Blyton's George Kirrin, of the *Famous Five* (1942-1963); Joyce Lankester Brisley's Milly-Molly-Mandy (1928-1967). (I have a distinct memory of sitting in the middle of my parents' double bed, aged around four or five, ripping out pages from a library copy of one of Brisley's short story collections, one after another. My mother, on interrupting me, was horrified; I had no words to explain it was not an act of destructive malice towards the book or its contents; rather one of deep attachment, even love.) A little later, there was funny, warm Rose Red from Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did at School* (1873); Anastasia Krupnik's friend Henry Peabody, in Lois Lowry's *Anastasia's Chosen Career* (1987) with her shaved head and sarcasm; silent, angry Dicey Tillerman, anti-heroine of Cynthia Voigt's *Tillerman Cycle* (1981-1987). I could go on. I made lists, too, of likely literary queer forebears: the Fossil family's lodgers, Dr Smith and Dr Jakes, for example, from Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes* (1936); two women academics who share a room, and a life, and who move together at the end of the novel to "a very charming flat in Bloomsbury" (222). And I hoarded snippets from other LGBTQ figures who had expressed similar affiliations, returning again and again to an online comment made by lesbian cartoonist and writer Alison Bechdel, in which she asserts that Louise Fitzhugh's 1964 novel *Harriet the Spy* "has been one of my deepest influences" (n. pag.) To me, the implication was clear: much as I had, Bechdel was claiming Harriet M. Welsch, with her notebook and tomato sandwich, as a proto-lesbian role model for her child-self.

As I read more broadly in theory and criticism, I found my preoccupation with attempting to map and codify my queer affiliations with specific characters, texts and authors repeated in various iterations. As Sarah Waters notes in her doctoral thesis, the "process of retrospection, indeed, has often accompanied and inspired that of homosexual definition, and vice versa" (6). Unknowingly, I was participating in what Christopher Nealon terms "the simple but enduring practice of listing famous homosexuals from history – a gesture of genealogical claiming" (qtd. in Rohy 152). Except that my project was adjacent to, rather than coterminous with, the kind of list referenced by Nealon; rather than "famous homosexuals", I was enumerating proto-lesbian or proto-gay *literary* forerunners; rather than the whole sweep of "history", I was mining my own history – which, almost by default, given how profoundly encounters with books had contributed to my childhood sense of self – was a history of reading. Rohy notes that the construction of a queer historiography is one, often, of "imaginary affiliations proceeding backward" (141). Those unable to access information about homosexuality, for example, turn to books; readers seeking queer kinship assemble fragmentary 'family trees' featuring fictional as well as real forebears, and from a patchwork of sources – including children's literature. This, too, turned out to be an "enduring practice". I discovered that I was not the only reader to respond to these texts' "private flags", in Lynne Pearce's phrase, but that it was a surprisingly common readerly behaviour among LGBTQ individuals (66). I found kinship and community with other readers who had themselves responded similarly to certain key books in childhood or adolescence. My drive to evaluate my childhood and adolescent textual investments and identifications from a new-found adult perspective was shared by children's literature scholars, and I hungrily chased down examples of critics who had returned to these texts in adulthood in order to contextualise these childhood textual preferences – or to analyse them anew.

Robin Bernstein notes, for example, that Harriet M. Welsch is commonly read "as a tomboy or proto-lesbian icon"; she cites Fitzhugh's biographer, Virginia L. Wolf, who describes *Harriet the Spy* as "a 'milestone' for many girls 'in the process by which they discovered and accepted their sexual orientation as lesbians'" (111). Kathleen T. Horning was one such reader. As an eleven-year-old, she knew only that she "felt different from other people": attempting to "put together the puzzle pieces", she knew she "liked boys, the clothes they wore" but "didn't want to marry one" (49). Harriet, she writes, was her "role model and savior", and inspired the young Horning to "experiment with cross-dressing" (49-50). Horning then elaborates a reading of Harriet as "a kindred spirit", centring on clothing choices – including those of the Boy with the Purple Socks (50-1). According to Horning, while he wears these socks at the behest of his mother, who wants him to stand out in a crowd – ironically, as Horning points out, as he is otherwise remembered as a "kid [...] who was so boring no one ever bothered to learn his name" – his socks make him stand out in another way, to a particular subset of readers (50). Horning writes that:

> [h]e also stands out to readers in the gay community, for whom the color purple has symbolic meaning. The purple socks are representative of the details Fitzhugh put into her books that resonate with a gay audience used to reading between the lines. (50-51)

For Rohy, this is an example of the ways in which "literary scenes of reading constitute [...] a narcissistic mirror" (136). In this mode of reading, self-affirmation is bounced back and forth between a reading subject and a text. For example, the adult lesbian reading *Harriet the Spy* knows herself to be a lesbian, and reads that identification back into the text. Her adult reading, therefore, produces not only the childhood she must then retrospectively have experienced, but the queer representation she now desires – or recalls having desired – within that book from childhood. This theme of the retroactive constitution of queerness within childhood reading would become

increasingly important to my project, as I applied it to the histories and memories of reading that were shared with me.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Tendencies* of her childhood "struggle to wrest" meaning from books, her need for "sustaining news of ideas, the world, myself, and (in various senses), my kind" (4). Like Sedgwick – and like myself – Horning's reading of Fitzhugh's novel can be seen as a kind of grappling to "wrest" significance from it: she unravels a queer subtext covering Harriet's "baby butch" identity, her friends' upending of gender stereotypes, and a central message about not conforming and being true to oneself (51). Even purple socks are, for Horning, a coded call to the queer reader, rich with "symbolic meaning" (50). In another example, Jocelyn Van Tuyl argues that illustrator Ruth Gervis's depiction of Streatfeild's Doctor Smith and Doctor Jakes provides paratextual support for a reading of them as a lesbian couple (see fig. 1). Making a comparison between Dr Jakes, with her "necktie, glasses, short hair, and sensible shoes", and 'mannish' Stephen Gordon, Van Tuyl pays careful attention to Gervis's illustration (61). "Flanking the bespectacled don", she observes, stands:

> a shorter woman in more conventionally feminine garb – a dress whose left sleeve puckers distinctively just below the shoulder. These horizontal lines probably represent gathers in the smocked garment, yet the body language suggests that the taller doctor has her arm around her companion. (61)

Van Tuyl, too, is wringing meaning from Gervis's illustration, even as she acknowledges that the "horizontal lines probably represent gathers" in the fabric, rather than the affectionate hand of a romantic partner (61). Beyond engagements with the obvious stand-out texts such as Hall's, then, these intent, fine-grained, painfully hopeful hypotheses convey something of the acute desire for representation that attends much queer literary criticism. From such scanty material – "the smallest moments of queer reading", as Rohy puts it – are woven queer stories to sustain lives (111).

The historiography of these small moments of queer reading is also somewhat patched and fraying; a matter of piecing together scraps from diverse accounts. Robert

Dessaix, Philip Kennicott, Andrew Solomon and Kath Weston, among others, have written of vitally important, self-fashioning encounters with books in childhood and adolescence; Dessaix and Kennicott in memoir and autobiographical essay, Solomon and Weston as personal asides in critical writing of their own. I will revisit and explore all these in the pages that follow. Foremost among these reading histories are Hennegan's essay "On Becoming a Lesbian Reader", published in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction,* a collection edited by Susannah Radstone; Lynch's 1990 essay "Cruising the Libraries", which first appeared in Joanne Glasgow and Karla Jay's collection *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*; a 1994 essay by Biddy Martin, "The Hobo, the Fairy and the Quarterback", first published in the journal *Profession* and subsequently anthologised both by Martin, in her collection of essays, *Femininity Played Straight* (1996), and later by Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd, in their collection *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011); and finally, Sedgwick's "Promising, Smuggling, Reading, Overreading" and "A Poem is Being Written", both in *Tendencies* (1993). Hennegan, Martin, Lynch and Sedgwick all critically re-engage with childhood experiences of books and reading, in order to analyse something of the ways in which these experiences inform their adult identities. In these accounts I found a valuable way of, again, complicating the picture built up by my initial forays into queer children's literature criticism: although necessary, I felt there was something a little too neat, or, perhaps, constraining about discussions of children's literature which sought to read certain works through the lens of gay and lesbian studies or queer theory, expertly wielded by the professional critic. These more self-reflective critical pieces helped to fill in some of the gaps relating to what Abate and Kidd call "queer theories of children's textuality", by supplying recollections of readers themselves (2). Each contributes usefully to my own critical framework: I now briefly survey their approaches and key concerns.

"At twelve", writes Hennegan, "I didn't even know the word [lesbian]. I wasn't clear who I was yet, but I had inklings" (167). In her essay, Hennegan describes her "uncertain progress as a youthful lesbian reader" (166). Motivated at first only by an "ill-defined [...] pleasure" in certain characters or plot conjunctions, she gradually assembled her own "much cherished canon" along affective lines, guided by certain books' capacity to provide her with an elusive, yet profoundly necessary "sense of warmth, comfort, recognition and inclusion" (168-69). An eclectic and transtemporal reading list follows, from the homoeroticism of ancient Greek poetry, to the sex-segregated realms of the boys' and girls' school story, to the sublimated passion between men in the poetry of the First World War. Hennegan analyses the content of her childhood and adolescent reading with acuity, teasing out the elements of these texts that provided her with the reading experiences she desired, that enabled her to "recognise, respect and enact" her emerging sexuality (169). Hennegan nicely illustrates Catharine Stimpson's concept of the "paracanon": a collection of works bound not by agreed standards of cultural merit, literary 'worth', or so-called 'high' culture, but simply because they are "beloved" by their reader, and because, in some sense, they provide for the reader a certain "gratification of needs" (958). Further, she dissects her own reading practice, her strategies of filtering, ignoring, adding or editing narratives until they met her exacting requirements. The "relations of my personal literary canon to other, more orthodox ones", she writes, "were quixotic":

> Sometimes they overlapped with them (Homer and Austen), sometimes they diverged (Blyton and Brazil) or ran underground, out of sight (Walford and Warboise. *Who?* WARBOISE, Jane, Mrs.) And sometimes it marched side by side, parallel but mocking (as in 'You read *your* Dickens and I'll read *mine*!'). (169)

More than merely a list of her own personal textual preferences, however, assembling these texts contributes also to Hennegan's sense of belonging to a broadly homosexual collectivity. This mutually constitutive and sustaining relationship between text(s) and reader(s) – the inclusion of the text within a queer paracanon, the reader within queer

community – helps to demonstrate the relations between wider social and cultural forces and individual subjectivities in structuring the "intricate domains of desire, intimacy, and love", in Stimpson's phrase (957).

Lynch assembles a personal literary canon of her own, following a thread from Nancy Drew and Doctor Dolittle to a passionate identification with Carson McCullers's misfit protagonists Frankie and Mick, in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) respectively; from there, to Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and on to the lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s and 1960s. As an adult reader now able to access a "vast selection of lesbian and gay literature", Lynch asserts that "[t]here was no way Cinderella or Little Miss Muffet was gay" (46-47). But attempting to ascribe queerness *to* or inscribe queerness *within* characters from nursery rhyme, fairy tale, contemporary and classic children's fiction is a clear indicator of the weight of the burden carried by books and reading for the young Lynch, in the absence of other role models. Her classificatory no-*maybe*-yes, as applied to Cinderella, Little Miss Muffet, Nancy Drew and Doctor Dolittle, is a taxonomy of the cultural resources available to her in childhood, and their likely uses to her, through a specifically queer lens. In moving from childhood to adult perspectives in this piece, however, Lynch reminds us that, as in all memory-work, "little Lee" is necessarily a construct, recalled and remade from a particular, adult, subject position.

Martin's essay takes a slightly different approach: rather than a journey through her reading choices and practices from childhood to adolescence, she describes sitting down with two friends "to discuss literature and what we do", only to find that discussion unexpectedly, stubbornly, mired in particular memories of childhood reading (35). Intrigued by "the power of our attachment even now to these books", Martin and her friends Carol and David embark on a project to reread these "favourite childhood books…the books in which we most thoroughly lost ourselves, or found ourselves in that process through which the losing becomes the finding, or vice

versa" (35-36). Martin discusses Carol's identification with Wendy from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* [*Peter and Wendy*] (1911), David's pull towards the "lone victim-hero" of adventure story *The Hobo of Devil's Gulch* (n.d.) and her own attachment to "Chip Hilton, star athlete" and protagonist of a series of formulaic football stories (36-37). Martin is clear, however, that such "obvious identifications" are only a starting point for the analyses that follow, which could, she writes, "never be aligned in any simple way with gender differences or with sexual object choice, with the differences between apparently straight and apparently queer sexualities" (37). For Martin, reading and experiences-with-books are "folded" into selfhood, so that material encountered within the pages of a book becomes part of the "folds and pleats that constitute subjectivity" (37-43). As a conceptualisation of the way in which childhood and adolescent reading informs identity over time, I find this metaphor both persuasive and elegant. If Hennegan alerts us to thinking about particular strategies of reading, and Lynch reminds us that the adult remembering childhood reading is also *reconstructing* that reading and that child-self, Martin's metaphor prompts reflection on the relations between the reader and the material object of the book. These themes – of ways of reading, the time of reading and the materiality of reading – would become increasingly important to my project.

They play out, too, in Sedgwick's "Promising, Smuggling, Reading, Overreading" and "A Poem is Being Written", which also deal with memories of reading in childhood and adolescence. Sedgwick too, in Martin's phrase, "clears a corridor back to childhood" (33). For Sedgwick, remembered experiences of and with books and reading are more crucial to subjectively felt queer experience and the construction of queer identity than "contact with people of any gender or sexuality" (*Tendencies* 207). Further, in evaluating why "people who do queer writing and teaching" undertake the work they do, she suggests a compulsion to "keep faith with vividly remembered promises made in childhood" (3). While Sedgwick cautions against creating an Ur-text

of queer origination, arguing that "gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals", she nevertheless reveals a fascination of her own with the ways in which queer identities are forged in early life (331). She recalls her own childhood and adolescent forays into the library. "Nothing," she declares, "makes me feel so, simply, *homosexual* as the evocation of library afternoons" (207). She describes "dead-ended searches" among the stacks, taking '"wild' guesses" at likely-looking books that "as I got more experienced, turned out to be almost always right" (207). "Right" in the sense that they provided her with another piece in the jigsaw, or a lead to follow up. In order for twelve-year-old Eve Kosofsky to find out about homosexuality, it was necessary to follow a treasure hunt of textual clues. Throughout Sedgwick's writing on reading she repeatedly conjures an imaginary child or adolescent reader. In her introduction to *Novel Gazing*, she posits "a kind of genius loci for queer reading", a teenage girl who is "reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer" (2-3). As well as situating the reader, emphasising the importance of the material to reading, and suggesting some ways in which queer reading might operate, Sedgwick foregrounds the temporal. Observing "that intimate anachronism by which a queer grown-up can sometimes keep drawing on the energies, incredulities, and discoveries of an earlier moment of passionate, incompetent reading and recognition", Sedgwick mobilises memories of reading in childhood and adolescence as critical to queer self-fashioning over time (31). She theorises a relation between adult reading, childhood or adolescent reading strategies, the affective aspects of these experiences, and the memory of these experiences, that informs my research in important ways.

In the previous section, I elaborated the recursive nature of many fictional and non-fictional scenes of reading. In the first stages of my own research, too, that model

persisted, as I researched other writers' and readers' *textual* explorations of their own reading histories, reading readers' readings of their own childhood and adolescent reading, to borrow Rohy's phrase. Waters's conception of the project of queer retrospection and self-definition can also be seen to play out in my own initial, exploratory research, as I, too, looked back at my past reading memories and history. Though inclusive of childhood experiences-with-books and reading in a more expansive form, and though engaged with thinking through the relations between childhood reading and queer adult selfhood at which I wanted to worry, I still felt a kind of claustrophobia engendered by the *mise en abyme* of these repeatedly rehearsed narratives of reading a predictable array of key queer texts, a certain set of narratives *about* reading growing up around them. Literary scenes of reading are, Rohy suggests, "a potentially disorienting hall of mirrors" – the *mise en abyme* effect with which I was concerned (136). What's more, I had become increasingly frustrated by criticism which, though invested in the intersections between queerness and children's literature, left no investigative space for the reading histories and memories of everyday readers.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick conjures "gay or proto-gay children", whose existence, she suggests, has been "more or less abandoned by constructivist gay theory" (42). Picking up again on this idea that much gay and lesbian historical work has been focused on a kind of reclamation project, a looking back in order to identify and gather examples of queerness in the past (as a way to legitimate queer presence, and the queer present), Sedgwick suggests that there may be a "vastly more necessary" (although, she demurs, a "far less permissible") reclaiming to be undertaken (42-3). Instead of "Homeric heroes, Renaissance painters, and medieval gay monks" – Nealon's "listing [of] famous homosexuals from history" – Sedgwick puts forward the work of "recognizing and validating the creativity and heroism of the effeminate boy or tommish girl of the fifties (or sixties or seventies or eighties)" (43). Sedgwick suggests

that these underexamined subjects experience themselves as having "a sense of constituting precisely a *gap* in the discursive fabric of the given", a sense which, she argues "has not been done justice, so far, by constructivist work" (43). Attention to the reading histories and memories of LGBTQ adults – children in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s – not only recognises and validates the children they were, the adults they have become, but contributes something vital and as yet underexamined about the process of that becoming. It adds to existing narratives about LGBTQ reading and experiences-with-books, moving away from the *Phaedrus*, Krafft Ebing, Edward Carpenter, and Radclyffe Hall, or, at the least, offering up other, less canonically queer works, to shelve alongside these.

Bringing queerness and the child into dialogue in this way can be conceptually tricky, and it is necessary to lay out some of the theoretical and critical thinking on these issues, and my positioning here. Gabrielle Owen comments that "[w]hile gay adults may retrospectively claim their childhoods as gay, present children are not yet gay because they are not understood to be capable of the desires that would make them so" ("Is the trans child a queer child?" 96). Self-evidently, my narrators, whom I will introduce in full later in this chapter, *were* children and were able to access and to reconstruct their memories of childhood and their child-self for the purposes of this project. Self-evidently also, they *are* LGBTQ. Some position their child-selves as already invested with the adult identity they now claim – Jo, for example, who refers to her childhood experience as a "trans girl". Others – Mary, or Mark, for example – only came to an understanding of their gay selfhood later in adult life. Therefore I position my narrators' child-selves as proto-gay, proto-lesbian, or protoqueer, without claiming gay, lesbian or queer as their identity. Throughout this research, I bore in mind Sedgwick's axiom that "many gay adults may never have been gay kids and some gay kids may not turn into gay adults" (333). I intend the term protoqueer to function as a mutable and expansive gesture towards what each of my narrators *would become*,

rather than a static, fixed label for what they *were*. It reflects the early stage of the shaping of their identities – if, indeed, such shaping was observable in their specific narrative.

My research aims to more than merely to fill this gap in this "discursive fabric" – it produces original contributions of its own: about the material book, the spaces of book culture and the socially embedded nature of reading as an act, and the ways in which books and reading facilitate reflection on the strange temporalities of queer experience(s), and their changing legibility across time (Sedgwick 43). Nevertheless, informed by my readings of Hennegan, Lynch, Martin and Sedgwick, and further using Sedgwick and Rohy's theoretical interventions, this project proceeds from the position that, within the broader history of the relationship between queer readers, books and reading outlined in the previous section, the childhood and adolescent reading experiences of everyday LGBTQ adults in the latter part of the twentieth century are underexamined and undertheorised. I was alert to the fact that, beyond the textual examples gathered and relayed here, the memories of childhood and adolescent reading I sought – those of the "effeminate boy and tommish girl", among others – might well not be readily available in the historical record. After all, *I* had never shared my memories of reading in early life, nor my continued preoccupation with them in adulthood. In order to access this hidden history of LGBTQ reading experiences, therefore, I turned to ordinary, adult, LGBTQ readers who would be willing to talk to me about their memories of reading in childhood and adolescence.

Positioning *Textual Preferences* as a queer oral history of childhood reading

In gathering oral histories of reading in childhood and adolescence from self-identified LGBTQ narrators, this research makes a unique contribution to several fields, all of which have engaged *to some extent* with the issues with which I am concerned. I aim to bring this existing work into dialogue in order to shed new light on each field and to

argue for the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the research questions under consideration.

The oral history of reading is, in itself, a relatively circumscribed research area. Oral histories of reading have tended to be organised along national or geographical lines. Lucy Taksa and Martyn Lyons's *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading, 1890-1930* (1992) a cultural history based on interviews with 60 Australian readers, was the first literary history of Australia to draw on real readers' experiences. In the UK, Alistair McCleery and David Finkelstein's study Scottish Readers Remember (2006-9), was the first sustained attempt to map Scottish readers' experiences, practices tastes and habits, investigating the ways in which reading contributed to the establishment of individual and collective identity. Mary Grover's ongoing project Reading Sheffield (2010-present) is based on oral history interviews with 58 readers to date and aims to capture the reading culture of the city. Most recently, the AHRC-funded project Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories conducted interviews with 25 library-based book group participants from Wandsworth, South London. *Textual Preferences*, however, establishes an archive of reading histories clustered around narrators' sexual orientation and gender identity. In so doing, it develops existing oral historical work which investigates LGBTQ reading practices and relationships with books through original oral histories. To date the only project I have encountered aside from *Textual Preferences* which I would locate within this emerging field is Amy Tooth Murphy's unpublished doctoral thesis, *Reading the Lives Between the Lines: Lesbian Oral History and Literature in Post-War Britain. Textual Preferences* differs from Murphy's project, however, in three key ways. Firstly, it asks questions about *childhood* and adolescent experiences-with-books and reading, rather than about the reading that informed lesbian identity in (young) adulthood or later in life. Secondly, in seeking to talk to narrators who self-identity as gay, bisexual, trans and queer as well as lesbian, it considers queer subjectivities in broader terms. Thirdly, it

goes beyond the immediate post-war period, incorporating memories of reading from the 1980s and 1990s.

Textual Preferences also builds on oral historical work on the lives of LGBTQ individuals. UK-based LGBTQ oral histories such as Clare Summerskill's *Gateway to Heaven: Fifty Years of Lesbian and Gay Oral History* (2012), Jane Traies's *The Lives of Older Lesbians: Sexuality, Identity and the Life Course* (2016) and *Now You See Me: Lesbian Life Stories* (2018), and the Hall Carpenter Oral History Project tend to focus on social life, work, politics and activism rather than solitary or private activity, intellectual life or the queer imaginary. Such reflections on books and reading as are captured through these LGBTQ oral histories are often used to situate narrators in terms of socio-historical context, rather than generating more sustained analysis of the role they might have played in these narrators' lives. This project is indebted to touchstone US-based oral historical studies of lesbian and gay lives – for example, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: A History of a Lesbian Community* (1993) – but has not engaged comprehensively with them. Developing the nascent body of queer oral historical work (see Nan Alamilla Boyd, and Kevin P. Murphy et al.), I aim to bring queer as a theoretical approach into dialogue with LGBTQ as lived experience, in order to ask how 'queer reading' might play out among LGBTQ readers, who may or may not also position themselves as queer. (See below for a further explication of my use of the terms LGBTQ and queer throughout this thesis.) Jennings's *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls* has provided a useful discussion of lesbian lives as well as modelling the close-reading of extant oral history archives alongside other archival sources. From oral history theory more broadly, Lynn Abrams' *Oral History Theory* (2016) has provided invaluable theoretical support, as has the work of Alessandro Portelli, Douglas Boyd and Mary Larson.

From queer studies, I use Sedgwick, Rohy and Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) to think through the

relationships between queerness, reading, childhood and the temporal which thread through this project. Work from Owen, Eric Tribunella, Michael Cobb, Steven Bruhm, Natasha Hurley, and Tison Pugh has further helped to structure the relationship between queerness and childhood. These theorists usefully frame a difficult topic, to which, as Cobb and Tribunella note, there is often significant resistance, both from outside and within queer theory. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on the history of sexuality, Tribunella highlights the central importance of children and childhood to the way gender and sexuality are constructed and enacted; childhood sexuality, he writes, is a "strategic site of knowledge and power", contested by both family and state (695). Lee Edelman, for example, pits the symbolic Child and the queer in absolute opposition in his polemical essay "The Future is Kid Stuff", railing "[f]uck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor innocent kid on the Net" (29). For Edelman, the "Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public library" is emblematic of the investments made by a heteronormative society in upholding the mainstream social and political order, one that is violently queer-denying and queer-hostile (21). Other theorists engage more productively with the possibilities of queerness in childhood. Bruhm and Hurley suggest in their 2004 edited collection *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* that any sexual expression on the part of the child – presumed to be not-yet-heterosexual and yet idealised as innocently asexual – is in some sense 'queer'; while Pugh posits that, given these simultaneous restrictions on and expectations of the child, it is impossible for "any sexual desire to signify normatively" in childhood (2). For Pugh, the figure of the child queers even heterosexuality (4-5).

Despite Edelman's invocation of the "provocative book from the shelves of the public library", however, the flaring intensity of queer theorists' engagement with the figure of the child remains separate to queer theory's growing, although generally lesser engagement with children's literature *per se*, as Hurley observes in her 2011

article, "The Perversions of Children's Literature" (122). In this area, Bruhm and Hurley's collection explores the "space for childhood queerness" opened up by those depictions of children within children's literature who do not fit the norms of gender expression or (adult) heterosexuality (xiv). Pugh suggests, further, that (hetero)sexuality's occluded position within the rhetorics of children's literature establishes children's literature itself on "queer foundations" (2). Bernstein, Horning, Sherrie Inness and Roberta Seelinger Trites's work on queer(ing) children's literature has provided further critical context, usefully collated by Abate and Kidd's *Over the Rainbow* (2011). While the 'children' under consideration in this study are something more than symbolic or textual figures, they are nevertheless constructed in my narrators' accounts. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephen Thomson caution against being wholly beguiled by the child-self, who, they assert, must remain critically distanced from the adult self by "temporal otherness"; and further, warn against "the apparition of the real child" (42, 37). This acknowledgment of memory's inherent instability proved a constructive reminder as I began the interview process, as I discuss further below. Bringing into proximity queer theory, children's literature and the "former child", to use Maria Tatar's term – by which I mean, the adults I interviewed, reflecting on their own child-selves – *Textual Preferences* draws on these rich existing interventions, in order to propose an original study of queerness in and from childhood onwards (10).

In the field of reading studies, *Textual Preferences* develops work on real readers, such as Lynne Pearce's work on feminist readers and Janice Radway's foundational *Reading the Romance* (1984). It contributes to a recent and growing body of work on interviewing and reading (see, for example, the Themed Section "Interviews and Reading" in the 2019 issue of *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, edited by Shelley Trower, Graham Smith and Amy Tooth Murphy). It also contributes to memory-work on reading and rereading, guided by Alison Waller's

Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics (2019). Additionally, reading memoirs such as Francis Spufford's *The Child that Books Built* (2002) offer useful models for negotiating remembered reading and exploring the construction of identity through experiences-with-books. A key theoretical concept for this project is Stimpson's idea of the "paracanon" – the private, personal canon specific to each narrator (957). Among other key critical sources, I draw on Leah Price's work on the materiality of the book, Mary Jacobus's *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (1999), Rita Felski's 2008 *Uses of Literature* and Christina Lupton's work on the intersections between the materiality and the time of reading. In theories and histories of reading, queer reading is often a useful exemplar of the ways in which a particular strategy might operate: see, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus on symptomatic reading, in "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009). However, while it is generally acknowledged that, as Michael Millner reminds us, "identity groups […] play important roles in determining the meaning of reading", the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer are frequently elided within other categories such as gender, race, ethnicity or class (26). In analyses of *children's* reading, such as JA Appleyard's foundational *Becoming a Reader* (1994), identity, as far as it is considered, is usually a matter of 'boys' and 'girls' rather than any more nuanced or intersectional framing. I suggest that gathering oral histories of reading from LGBTQ readers can contribute an important and underexamined element both to queer literary studies and theories and histories of reading, providing much-needed specificity to the general category of 'reader', and moving beyond a consideration of 'queer literature' or biographical attention to queer authors to consider queer reading practices and bookish behaviours more specifically.

Methodology

That queer subjectivity is produced, revealed, informed by and reconstructed within *childhood and* adolescent experiences-with-books and reading is the first claim of this

thesis. The second is more methodological: that talking about books and reading allows analysis of these issues in new and useful ways. In order to examine the originary place of reading and books in shaping queer subjectivity, and to explore the strange afterlives of these readerly experiences, *Textual Preferences* uses oral history as its primary method of data-collection. Oral history is a collaborative and participatory methodology with particular resonance for the recovery of histories often marginalised by or hidden from mainstream accounts. I argue that both reading as a practice and ordinary LGBTQ lived experience fall into this category of the marginalised or hidden; their intersection in LGBTQ oral histories of reading is particularly charged, and yet has remained underexplored.

Alongside the body of original oral historical material that *Textual Preferences* assembles, existing accounts of LGBTQ childhood and adolescent reading and experiences-with-books from various critical, anecdotal and oral historical sources provided useful socio-historical context for my narrators' recollections and reflections, from those negotiating similarly circumscribed or coded material. Interviews, memoir and critical writing generated several rich – if scattered – examples, enabling me to bring my narrators' memories of reading into productive dialogue with other first-hand accounts of queer reading and experiences-with-books. In addition, I mined existing oral history archives and projects which focused on LGBTQ lives for mentions of books or reading. Foremost among these were the work of Summerskill and Traies, as mentioned, and, most fruitfully, the Hall Carpenter Oral History Project.

After gathering my eighteen interviews, I transcribed them in full. This rendering of these interviews from audio to transcript was something I considered carefully, concerned as they are so particularly with the literary and the textual. Any oral history is provisional and fluid, produced dialogically as a result of a unique, performative interaction between narrator and researcher in a temporally discrete and situated encounter. However, oral history, as Abrams reminds us, is a multi-layered

praxis, both "the act of recording and the record that is produced", as well its interpretation (2). At each stage – from interview to audio recording to written transcript to analysis – the original oral event is iteratively transmuted through the construction of successive, mutually contingent narratives: as Abrams puts it, the researcher "hears and reads different versions of the narrative using each to create another – the interpretation – in a chain of versions" (9). The attempt to capture an oral history is always already an attempt to mediate it, as Mary Larson has also argued ("What Media Really Means: Implications of the Move from Analog to Digital", 2016). It is therefore useful to consider this question of mediation, or, as Larson explains, "the way in which information is shaped, transformed, and translated (accurately or not) by the nature of its container or medium", in more detail, as one with significant methodological implications (318).

Shifts in oral historical practice over the history of the discipline have seen a swing away from what was once an overreliance on the text-based output of the oral history interview encounter. Post-war – the portable tape-recorder was introduced in 1948 – the expense of audiotape meant that tapes were often recorded over and reused after interviews had been transcribed. "The true oral history product is the final typed memoir, the faithfully produced and standardized reminiscence, deposited in the archives for later generations," as Vaughan Davis Bornet wrote in 1955 (qtd. in Larson 320). As audiotape became more affordable, following the introduction of the cassette in the early 1960s, and perhaps as practitioners became more accustomed to audio as a format, the tape began to be regarded as a "primary source", as Louis Shores put it in 1966, rather than, as Louis Starr had written four years earlier, a "first draft" (qtd. in Larson 320-1). Although the audio recording increased in status throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Douglas Boyd and Larson note that, practically speaking, "the analog framework made it extremely difficult to use anything but the text" for analytic or interpretative purposes (7). In the digital age, however, the difficulties of storage,

search and playback have been significantly eased, and the focus of oral history interpretation has been conclusively returned to the oral, and aural. Archives frequently consist of audio alongside interview summaries, with no transcripts at all. Analysis of the oral history interview's orality and aurality have become foregrounded as a result, with urgent implications and exciting possibilities for oral historians, as I discuss further in Chapter One.

While I intended from the outset of this project to position this research at the intersection of the history of reading, adult-centred children's literature research and queer studies, it is oral history as a methodological approach which enables – indeed, demands – this interdisciplinarity. As Abrams puts it, drawing on Portelli's work on oral history as a "composite genre", it is a method which "requires that we think flexibly, across and between disciplinary boundaries, in order to make the most of this rich and complex source" (3). The oral history interview process helped to elucidate, for me, that in narrating experiences with books and reading over the life-course, the neat divisions of discipline and sub-field are instantly collapsed. Oral histories of reading, and of the book, are at once about the book as object, where it was read, with whom, and when – as well, of course, as about what is read. Further, the situated and time-bound aspects of an oral historical approach allow issues of materiality, embodiment, spatiality and temporality to emerge and to be foregrounded, through the interview process itself. Recalled experiences-with-books and reading are those of sound, smell, and texture, comfort and community, text and subtext, misreading and intertextual leap, private association and sexual fantasy. Books, in these oral histories, stand in for a family member, or for a reader's past, present or future self; they are talisman, and timeslip, and portent. These important issues are all bound up with selfhood and subjectivity, demonstrating the complexity of what Martin calls "the tight braid or weave" of the self (42). The oral history interview itself is a repository of emotion and intersubjective connection between researcher and narrator; memories of

reading trail memories of resentment, distress, boredom, confusion, desire, joy, recognition, hope. There is a mass of resonant material to negotiate and pick through.

From this mass – the experience of conducting these interviews, and their audio and textual outputs – certain key issues emerged, which I would like to cover here as context for the analysis which follows. Firstly, to outline the affordances of oral history as a method for gathering reading histories, and especially, for gathering reading histories from LGBTQ adults. "Reading", according to Robert Darnton in his field-defining 1982 article on the history of reading, "remains the most difficult stage to study in the circuit followed by books" (74). Such memories of books and reading as I sought are often difficult to trace, even within studies which aim to capture reading histories from a variety of sources, including oral testimony, diaries, letters and autobiographical reflections. The Reading Experience Database, for instance, holds over 30,000 records of reading experiences of British people and of visitors to Britain between 1450 and 1945, and yet returns 4 records for 'homosexual' (3 are duplicated, and further, 'homosexual' appears in explanatory editorial square brackets); 5 for 'lesbian' (3 are duplicates); none for 'bisexual'; none (unsurprisingly) for more contemporary terms such as 'transgender', 'LGB', 'LGBT', 'LGBTQ' which were not in use pre-1945. There are 63 records for queer, but again, these contain many duplicates – as well as bringing up several references to 'Squeers', in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), and to the odd or strange more generally. Only one entry, relating to Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915), refers directly to sexuality. Taken from composer Benjamin Britten's published letters, his partner, singer Peter Pears, writes to him that Maugham's novel is "in his subtle way, is quite itching with queerness", adding, teasingly, "[p]erhaps I'll send you a copy to Chicago to read in bed" (Britten n. pag.) From over 30,000 records, then, only one reflects queer reading experience, and further, it is only possible to draw this conclusion definitively because of what is known of Britten and Pears's own biography.

Within the interviews I gathered for this study, these concerns were foregrounded acutely. One of my narrators, Andy – a gay man in his fifties – tells me in our first interview that he has "a few manuscript diaries from sort of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen". He is "surprised", he admits, that, "given how much I know I was reading, I don't write about what I'm reading very much". But then, he adds, "the things you do aren't often reflected in diaries, actually." It is a salutary reminder. Talking about books and reading allows for the capturing of crucial reading histories and memories that would otherwise remain unaccessed, or unaccessible. My first conversation with Mark – another gay man in his late fifties – produced the following response to the question of with whom, in his early reading experiences, he recalls feeling an identification, or affiliation: "taking the Famous Five as an example", he tells me, "I always related to [...] the kind of boy heroes, you know, the leaders, the boys who took control". He is immediately taken aback by this unexpected frankness. "Um, gosh. I don't, I just said something there I wasn't sure I meant," he continues, adding "but yeah, I suppose I did mean it". This is just one example among many of the production of original and unmediated responses during the interview process, that may otherwise be censored, withdrawn or remain unarticulated. It is not only memories of reading that are particularly drawn out through the oral historical method, but memories of queer experience, or reflections on queer experience, from individuals who may – for various reasons – be unaccustomed to verbalising such aspects of their interior life.

Secondly, the issue of intersubjectivity. This concerns what Abrams calls the "collision" of the individual subjectivities of narrator and researcher (58). This played out in various ways throughout my interviews. Sometimes, it produced positive results: my interviews with Kate, Mary and Amy, for example, were particularly rich. We shared certain unspoken assumptions and moments of understanding. Frustratingly, however, because these were moments were shaped by a shared positioning in relation to the queer, or to elements of lesbian identity – often the points most pertinent to my

research – they remained at least partially unarticulated. They often do not appear explicitly in the transcripts. Therefore, beyond the explication I attempt in the pages that follow, these points remain relatively inaccessible for future researchers working with this material. In other interviews, intersubjective relations had a less positive or productive effect. Mark and I, for example, did not establish an easy rapport, and this is reflected in the length and quality of the two interviews I carried out with him. Andy admitted feeling "awkward" about sharing certain of his past responses to books with me – his unquestioning ease, for example, with the all-male sodality promised by Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) – because I am a woman. In Chapter One, I explore the issue of intersubjectivity and its impact in more detail, in relation to the case study of rereading Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960) with my narrator Kate.

Lastly, the asynchronous task of being asked to reread childhood books in adulthood compounds an awareness – paramount in any oral history project – of the inherent instability of memory. This was something my narrators negotiated with varying degrees of comfort. Alice, for example, commented in our second conversation that, "in the first interview I hadn't reread that book, and so, I mean, having read it I'm not sure I was even right [...] I think I thought I had a different idea about what the books were about and the content". There was a lingering suggestion that she might have, in some sense, been giving me the 'wrong' answer. Andy, on the other hand, was far more sanguine: "it's very much my recollection now", he tells me: "I'm not pretending to have any accuracy". For the oral historian, this recognition of the *live* nature of memory, that a "memory narrative", as Abrams puts it, "is actively created in the moment", is of value, rather than a potential weakness (23). As such, I suggest anachronism not as a methodological flaw but as an opportunity for this research – a jarring, but productive positioning of things out of time, which might encourage further scrutiny of them, or in Sedgwick's phrase, a signal to examine "the unexpected currents

that may jolt between present and past" (*Novel Gazing* 30). I aim to follow multiple threads from approximately 29 hours of oral history interviews both backwards and forwards in time, to weave a mesh of memory, materiality, identity, textuality, sexuality, and noise, into texturally rich and rewarding tension.

Project design and the interview process

Though *Textual Preferences* asks about past reading histories and memories, it asks questions of narrators in the present; and in seeking to investigate how these past experiences have shaped the present, it is necessarily concerned with these narrators' contemporary self-conceptions. In order to identify potential participants, I wanted to speak to people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or as in some way represented by the initialism LGBTQ, *in their adult lives*. This would take into account the ways in which understanding of selfhood and identity can change and shift over a lifetime, and reach those narrators who, while currently perceiving themselves as other than heterosexual and/or cisgendered, may not have been overtly attuned to that positioning in childhood or adolescence. If, for example, I had framed my call-out for narrators as asking to speak to those who "grew up gay" (or LGBTQ) in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s or '90s, or to those who 'came out' in these decades, I would have been privileging the voices of narrators with a certain kind of relation to these aspects of their identity. In addition, I wanted to position *Textual Preferences* as distinct from other projects which have examined lived LGBTQ experience – for example, Murphy and Traies, mentioned above, which investigate lesbian experience specifically. While gay male identity is relatively documented and studied, an LGBTQ remit would, I hoped, allow me to engage with those identities that tend to receive less academic attention, namely bisexuality and trans identities.

Given the specific focus of my study – childhood and adolescent reading – and its intersection with sexuality, another driving motivation was to allow for the

complexity of an array of experiences-with-books and reading which might connect to the broadly *queer* in more methodological terms. There being, according to Rohy, Sedgwick and Bond Stockton, as mentioned above, a certain temporal incoherence about the work of thinking through queer identities in relation to childhood, my thinking here was that to ask these very questions about two topics (childhood, and sexuality) which connect with a certain charge or force, and to foreground the instability of memory, asynchrony and anachronism as opportunities rather than limitations, was to build a project on queer foundations. Underpinned by Sedgwick's description in *Tendencies* of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" this study is queer in approach as well as in subject matter (8). Designing, participating actively and listening deeply in the oral history interviews I carried out, as well as attuning to the oral and aural outputs of the interview in analysing the material gathered, necessitated managing precisely these kinds of proliferations and crosscurrents. Working in the intersections of queer selfhood and memory, this project was designed to be comfortable with the messy, the unstable and aleatory from the outset. In very practical terms, for example, I had no way of knowing who my narrators would be, which texts would constitute the corpus assembled as part of the project, or the kinds of memories of books and reading that would be shared with me. The 'openness' of the interview experience is set against the researcher's framework of questions, hypotheses and theoretical and critical interlocutors, and the resultant process of analysing the material gathered and writing up this thesis has been one of allowing for 'lapses' and 'excesses' that fragment, disrupt and overspill the planned project.

Set against this messy and dissonant mesh of identities which might intersect in all kinds of ways in the interviews I carried out (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

queer, child, adolescent, adult), however, I remained aware of their social and legislative curbing during the time period in which I was interested: notably, Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, the discriminatory legislation which stated that a local authority "shall not [...] intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" ("Local Government Act 1988" n. pag.). Repealed in England and Wales in 2003 and Scotland in 2000, Section 28 had a direct effect on public libraries' and schools' ability to make books featuring LGBTQ characters, content, or themes available to young audiences. Following 2000, there has been an exponential increase in books with LGBTQ themes published for children and young people, from picturebooks to LGBTQ young adult fiction. Erica Gillingham observes this trend in her unpublished doctoral thesis. Analysing Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins's bibliography of the young adult fiction featuring at least one LGBTQ character published in the United States between 1969 and 2004, Gillingham notes that of over 200 titles, one third came out between 2000 and 2004, in the last five years of the study (17). Extending Cart and Jenkins's survey into the 2010s, Gillingham documents the continued proliferation of such texts: for example, while the first work of young adult fiction featuring a bisexual protagonist was published in 2001 – Sara Ryan's *Empress of the World* – there were "at least" five such novels published in 2017 alone (246). In addition, online culture has had a radical impact on young LGBTQ people's ability to access information, representation and community; as E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen comment, the Internet has changed dramatically "the forms of selfhood and connectedness" available to young queer people (11). While an investigation of childhood and adolescent reading experiences post-2000 would produce a very different, though equally valuable study, it was therefore my intention to limit the age of potential narrators at the lower end, in order that they might have

already experienced childhood and adolescence before these significant shifts in the publishing and media landscape. I had no upper age limit.

Lastly, to ensure I would also be able to engage with key texts mentioned by my narrators, I wanted to speak to those who could talk about texts primarily written in English. Therefore, I set the following parameters for participants in the project that would result in this study:

- Born in 1982 or before (so would be 21 or over when Section 28 was repealed in England and Wales in 2003; 18 or over at the time of its repeal in Scotland in 2000).
- Able to talk about texts remembered from childhood and adolescence written mainly in English (whether or not participants themselves grew up in the UK or elsewhere).
- Self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or some combination of these or other terms which could broadly fall under the rubric LGBTQ.

I aimed to gather material from these narrators which would enable me to analyse to what extent they recalled experiences-with-books and reading from childhood and adolescence, in material, paratextual and textual terms, and how they connected these recollected experiences with their emerging queer identities. I purposefully set out to trace my narrators' reading processes and practices: for example, their interpretative and affective responses to particular books, or the particular reading strategies they may have employed. Finally, I asked to what extent oral histories of reading (and rereading) can prompt revised engagements with both books and texts, and enable critical reappraisals of certain texts. In the collection and analysis of this material, many of the answers to this set of research questions emerged. However, as with any research project, but especially one which involves material gathered from – and co-created with – living participants, in all their messy humanity, unanticipated themes

and concerns arose: primarily around those aspects of reading and book-use that were not solely textual, so, the materiality of the book-object, the significance of reading spaces, and the capacity of reading and the properties of the book to prompt reflection on the temporal peculiarities of queer experience.

After receiving ethics approval in January 2015, I carried out a pilot project consisting of a first interview with two narrators: Amy, who agreed to talk to me again in an optional follow-up interview, and whose contribution to this project continues to be integral, and an anonymous narrator who declined to participate in the main study – but whose generosity in sharing their responses, feedback and time cannot be overestimated (I use the singular pronoun 'they' to preserve anonymity). Their contributions are excluded from the analysis that follows. Concurrently, I began the process of recruiting participants for the main study, followed by the process of contacting possible narrators, arranging interviews, carrying them out, and transcribing the resulting audio. Narrators were recruited in a variety of ways. I produced a flyer (see Appendix 1) to advertise my project in public spaces – for example, my local library – and which I made available to attendees of the 2014 LGBTQ History and Archives conference held at London Metropolitan Archives, Lines of Dissent. I used my personal contacts, including interviewing friends of friends. I also speculatively contacted various lesbian, gay and trans charities and activist organisations. In casting this net I was mindful that, while keen to pursue all potential leads, I must remain conscious of the balance between the sexual orientations, gender identities, and ages of my respective narrators. As a result, my eventual pool of narrators included a range of orientations including lesbian, gay (woman and men), bisexual (one of my trans narrators), and queer (three women: two lesbians and my bisexual trans narrator). The spread of gender identities included six cis women, two trans women and two cis men. In terms of age, the youngest participant was in her early thirties, while the oldest was in her late sixties. (I provide biographical

information for my narrators in more detail below.) In terms of geography, I did not consciously aim to avoid clustering; as a result, my narrators were based in Cambridge, London and Edinburgh, respectively. I found it hard to recruit bisexual narrators; with, in one case a narrator who had previously self-identified as bisexual identifying within the context of the oral history interview as a lesbian, and in another case, a narrator choosing not to label her sexual orientation at all. I also found it prohibitively difficult to recruit a trans man for this project; the personal introductions I obtained and other personal contacts I made resulted in friendly email correspondence but no eventual interview. In both cases, this might reflect concern at discussing often publicly contested aspects of identity. While I achieved a fairly high level of diversity in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, and in terms of age, in other respects my pool of narrators was fairly homogenous; all white, predominantly middle-class, and with writers and academics rather over-represented in terms of professional background.

I first conducted a wide-ranging, semi-structured interview covering several aspects of remembered experiences-with-books and reading from childhood and adolescence with each of my ten narrators. This was followed in eight out of ten cases by an optional follow-up interview during which we discussed rereadings of one, two or three texts of particular significance. I asked each participating narrator to reread the book(s) ahead of this second interview, and undertook to (re)read the same works before we spoke. Co-creating with each of my ten narrators a counterarchive of books read in childhood and adolescence, we together established a corpus of fourteen texts that held particular significance. Transcribing every interview in full, I nevertheless attempted to remain attuned to them as aural outputs, as discussed above – aware that each iteration (for example, audio to transcript, transcript to quotation) mediates the original, situated interview encounter. I sent each transcript back to its narrator, for their interest, information and in order that they could correct any errors of fact or advise me of anything they wished to be redacted. Responses were mixed; from barely

veiled horror at the faithful rendering of the patterns of speech, to genuine interest in reading the interviews back, to meticulous comments and suggested amendments, and while I offered to share audio in this way, none of my narrators asked to listen to their interviews. Those narrators who wished for content to be redacted have had their transcripts clearly marked up for the attention of future researchers, and closed for online access; suggested amendments beyond factual errors in need of correction – for example, rephrasing – were not made, to preserve the accuracy of the output of the situated interview encounter. I analysed and manually coded my transcripts, organising material thematically according to the chapter outline set out below. This forms an audio archive of 18 oral history interviews, alongside a transcription of each. Together, these first and second interviews comprise approximately 29 hours of audio and 175,000 words of transcription. Audio and transcripts have contributed to the Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories project archive and will be preserved as a permanent reference resource by the University of Roehampton (for more information, please see Appendix 3).

Definition of terms

The terms LGBTQ and queer are used throughout *Textual Preferences*, which have thus far remained unqualified. I want to clarify my deployment of them here, as well as adding a brief note on some issues arising around trans and non-binary identities.

One of the most delicate issues in this kind of queer oral historical work is my use of the term queer itself. Co-creating this material with my ten narrators, I wanted to ensure their identities were invoked with integrity. As such, I specifically asked each of my narrators firstly, how they would describe their sexual orientation and gender identity, and secondly, how they understood the term queer – in personal, theoretical, or other terms. The responses I received were appropriately diverse, and they pull in several different directions. Nevertheless, it is worth analysing them here, in order to

establish a clear framework with which to proceed with the greater part of this thesis. Of ten narrators, four identified as lesbians, one as a gay woman, two as gay, one as bisexual and two found it difficult to label their sexual orientation, or preferred not to. Only three identified as queer.

My narrators' qualitative input is also valuable here. Carol, for example, describes herself as "nonstop hundred per cent lesbian" (despite relationships with men into her thirties); Eileen, on the other hand, who was previously in a heterosexual marriage, but had, at the time of our conversations, been in a monogamous relationship with a woman for some thirty years, suggests "let's not say gay", but "that I was attracted to women sexually". Mary, who reports her identity as "gay woman. Writer. Scottish…Mother", at the same time comments on the insufficiency of any fixed descriptors wholly to communicate the reality of lived selfhood in all its complexity. "I don't know", Mary continues, "they're like labels, aren't they. I don't mind them. But they don't really tell the story."

The term queer was variously perceived as a slur, as unclear, or as too "diluted", as well as being one a minority of narrators were happy to claim. Jennings usefully draws on Teresa de Lauretis's conception of queer, to argue that while lesbian and gay studies has been concerned with assimilation, queer theory aims to "destabilise and hopefully dissolve" the line between the dominant and marginal, the normative and non-normative (4-5). My narrators range themselves along a spectrum that roughly maps to these theoretical poles. Carol and Mark, who identify as lesbian and gay respectively, were adamant that use of the term was, respectively, "completely unredeemable [sic]" and "a very derogatory term", even "abusive". For Eileen, positioning herself also at the assimilationist end of this spectrum, the use of the term is a strategy to "shock people and then pull back from it, to say queer is actually ordinary. Queer is not odd. Queer is not queer. Queer is acceptable. Well, the word isn't". Eileen states that "I've never felt it was a good identity, or something that I

wanted to be associated with, because obviously what it's trying to do is to use a word that [...] says, we're out of the ordinary. And my whole approach to this says not." Kate is "so sick of hearing that term", she tells me – not because she finds it offensive, but because it has lost its specificity to her, in its designation of same-sex desire: "it's lost its connection with sexuality [...] I know lots of straight people who call themselves queer". Further, she sees it as having been co-opted by a certain subcultural group, wrested from its origins in LGBTQ culture: "if everybody's queer, then what does it mean [...] it's become so diluted that I want to be gay, I think, or even lesbian, that's even less fashionable". Jo, Julia and Amy on the other hand were positive about the use of 'queer'; for Jo, "[i]t's to do with just being different and being proud of it"; Julia is "quite happy to be queer", using it, in contrast to Kate, in its most expansive sense: "I've met straight people that I'd consider to be queer". Amy also identifies with the term. Mary, however, was unsure about its use, and Andy questioned it, musing that:

> I see stuff about queer studies, and I'm thinking is it, is it an attempt to use, to, to mean what I mean by gay, but in a more inclusive, LGBTQ kind of way, that doesn't have the sort of male homosexuality assumptions built into it? Or is it about another kind of outsiderliness of which sexuality is just one part and one element of it?

Noting that "some people are using it in different ways to others, and I'm not quite sure what they mean by it", Andy's uncertainty echoes Alice's emotionally charged response: queer, for Alice, is concerned with the "odd", the "gay", the abusive and "disgusting", and is, she tells me "too exciting". "[I]t's not a word I'd be confident in using," continues Andy, which, he adds, "is quite unusual because I'm quite precise about the meanings of words." Clearly, the term, as applied to lived LGBTQ experience, is multivalent: offensive, provocative, confusing, irritating, useful, liberating. Such a kaleidoscopic variety of reactions to the term in response to my questioning, and such attention given to its usage by several of my narrators, reinforces my commitment to precision in its deployment throughout this thesis, and to a full and detailed discussion of the breadth of these responses in this introductory chapter.

I have therefore chosen to use "LGBTQ" when discussing *people*, either as individuals or as specific groups, so "LGBTQ narrators", "LGBTQ adult readers". This is to ensure that I am not at any point inadvertently describing my narrators with words they would find derogatory or offensive, or using terms to define their identities that they would not use about themselves. When referring to practices, strategies, behaviours, in describing my own approach, and as a theoretical term, I use "queer", so "queer reading". Where I use queer in relation to identity/ies, it is to refer to all aspects of non-normative sexuality and gender identity: "queer selfhood". Boyd's reminder that it is "nearly impossible" for oral history narrators to "use language outside the parameters of modern sexual identities" and that they are, in this sense, linguistically bound by, as she puts it, the "discursive practices that create stable subject identities" proved useful in structuring this aspect of my thinking (179-80). I have tried, therefore, to mobilise queer as a methodological and theoretical approach while recognising my narrators' self-construction as subjects who occupy specific and often more strictly delineated identity categories.

I use cis or cisgender(ed) and trans to differentiate between those whose sense of their gender identity aligns with their sex as designated at birth, and those whose gender does not. At the time of carrying out this research, cultural awareness of terms such as "non-binary", "genderqueer" and "genderfluid" was lower than at the time of writing. Discussion of preferred pronouns was also not as prevalent in mainstream discourse even three or four years ago (2015-16), when these interviews were carried out, as it has become in the last year (2018-19). Although I had encountered the practice of checking preferred pronouns before in queer-only spaces, and although I intended to establish each interview as a safe and inclusive space for each of my participants, I regret that I did not build in a consideration of the preferred pronouns of my narrators into the design of my research methodology. As interviews were one-to-one, pronouns tended to be either first person or second person ("Tell me about…" or

"What do you recall…"). In writing up and about these interviews, however, I have stumbled into the problem of needing to refer to my narrators in the third person. In engaging with narratives of trans and nonbinary lives, it is critically important that pronoun use validates, rather than erases, narrators' gender. This includes the singular pronoun 'they'; again, more widespread at the time of writing than when these interviews were carried out. As Jo put it to me, when she became unable to continue living as a man: "it wasn't like there were any, there weren't any, there weren't any fucking, I'm sorry I'm swearing a lot, but there weren't any, there weren't any pronouns!". However, none of my narrators claimed a non-binary, genderqueer or genderfluid identity, aside from Jo, who, although stating in our first conversation that "I would describe myself as a third gender person [...] But I have to live as a woman, and that's fine", now uses 'she' and 'her' in her professional life and in various public fora. For example, in 2017, Jo was designated one of the Saltire Society Scotland's "Outstanding Women of Scotland". Her biographical statement deftly navigates the nuances of her changing self-conception over time: "she was raised as a boy", "it became clear to her she was not male", "she took the necessary steps to formalise her female identity" (Clifford n. pag.). Honoring Jo's current self-presentation, therefore, I use 'she' and 'her' when referring to her in the third person.

Meeting my narrators

Before moving on, I want to pause here briefly to introduce each of the ten narrators whom the reader will encounter over the chapters that follow. Our interviews ran to many hours, the transcripts to several thousands of words. This is not an attempt to summarise each interview, but to orient the reader and provide a reference point for consultation. In the order in which they appear in these pages, therefore - including this Introduction:

Jo A playwright and writer in her fifties, Jo has a background in academia. Jo was born in 1950 and grew up in Staffordshire, before attending boarding school from seven or eight years of age. Previously married to a woman, Jo claimed her trans identity fully after her partner's death and identifies also as bisexual and as queer. She has two children and describes herself as a 'proud father and grandmother'. We met once, at Jo's home in Edinburgh, on 9 May 2015. Distance and technological difficulties prevented our planned second interview from taking place; instead, Jo sent me brief notes by email on her rereading of the book we had planned to discuss at our second meeting, *She* by H. Rider Haggard (1886).

Mary At the time of our first and second conversations, Mary was making her debut as a novelist. Born in Glasgow, Mary grew up in Glasgow and Norwich. Her parents were middle class; her father was a university administrator and her mother a social worker. Mary has a son (from a previous relationship), and a long-term partner. She is in her late forties and, having come out in her twenties, describes herself as a gay woman. I interviewed Mary twice, at her home in Edinburgh, first on 12 May 2015, and subsequently on 28 December 2015. For our second conversation, we talked about rereadings of three books: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Jo of the Chalet School* (1926) and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937).

Mark A recently-retired headteacher in his late fifties, Mark had recently enrolled in a Masters degree. He was born in a suburb of Birmingham in 1959, and moved to Wiltshire around the age of eight. His mother was a teacher, and his father worked for the family engineering firm. Mark was previously married to a woman, with whom he has two children, and came out as gay in his early forties. He now has a long-term partner. I interviewed Mark twice at his home in Forest Hill, South London, first on 29

May 2015 and then on 16 December 2015. At our second meeting, we discussed a rereading of Ronald Welch's *The Gauntlet* (1951).

Andy A gay man in his fifties, Andy works as a civil servant. Born in Guildford in 1960, he grew up there and now lives and works in London. His parents were laboratory technicians, although his mother had given up work by the time he was born. Andy knew he was gay by his late teens. We met twice, at Andy's workplace in Westminster, first on 21 July 2015 and then on 21 December 2015. In our second interview, we discussed rereading Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946).

Kate Born in 1970 to working class parents, Kate was born in Wigan and grew up in Northampton before moving to London to pursue her PhD and academic career. Kate is in her mid-forties and identifies as a lesbian. Kate and I met twice at her home in London, first on 29 April 2015, and again on 4 December 2015. For our second conversation, we discussed a rereading of Rumer Godden's *The Diddakoi* (1972) and Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960).

Amy Amy was born in 1981, in Lanark, Scotland, and grew up there before moving to Glasgow and then Norfolk. Her father was working class, and worked as a painter and decorator. Amy came out when she was fourteen; now in her mid-thirties, she identifies as a butch lesbian, and also as queer. Amy and I met twice, at the University of Roehampton, London. Our first conversation was on 9 February 2015, and our second on 20 October 2015. For our second interview, we discussed rereadings of Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* (1948), and *A Village Affair* (1989), by Joanna Trollope.

Alice Following a stroke in 2005, Alice retired from her medical practice as a GP and is now a writer. Now in her sixties, it was following this stroke that Alice felt more able to claim her trans identity, although she still lives as Alex with her wife, with whom she has two adult children. Alice does not label her sexual orientation. Born in 1950 in Nigeria, Alice grew up in a middle class family, before being sent to boarding school aged around eight or nine. Alice and I met twice, at my home in Cambridge, on 30 April 2015, and on 20 January 2016. For our second interview, we discussed her rereadings of Enid Blyton's *Five on a Treasure Island* (1942) and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887).

Carol Carol is a physiotherapist and psychotherapist in her early sixties. Born in 1952, Carol grew up in a working class family in Purley, Croydon before moving to Lancaster for university. Her mother was a housewife and her father had a garage. Carol has lived in Nicaragua and now lives in London. Carol identifies as a lesbian, and has done since the age of nineteen, although she had sexual relationships with men in her thirties. She has two adopted children. We met twice, both times at her home in Stoke Newington, North London, first on 2 August 2015 and then on 6 December 2015. Our second interview concentrated on rereadings of Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did at School* (1873) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868).

Eileen Eileen is a retired civil servant in her sixties. She was born in 1949 to working class, Scottish parents. Her father was an engineer and her mother also worked away from the home. She grew up in Lancashire. Eileen was previously married to a man, with whom she had two children, before, in her thirties, beginning a long-term same-sex relationship with a woman with whom she parents two children. She is open about this but does not use any particular label to define her sexual orientation, except, occasionally, 'gay'. We met twice, at Eileen's home. Our first interview was on 12 August 2015, and we followed this up with a second conversation on 11 February

2016. At our second meeting, we discussed a rereading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868).

Julia An academic and writer, Julia is in her mid-forties. Born in 1971, she grew up in Wales, where her father was a vicar. She now lives in London and Berlin. Julia identifies as a lesbian, and also as queer. We met in Julia's office in London for our first and only interview, on 1 December 2015.

All interviews were conducted one-to-one. Examples of the Participant Consent Form and Oral History Recording Agreement all narrators signed are in Appendix 2. For more information on transcripts and audio files, including information on how to access both types of outputs online, please see Appendix 3.

Chapter outline

Over the course of these interviews, I examine my narrators' engagements with books from their earliest childhood memories, to their adult reflections on re-engaging with childhood reading, and through different readerly stances, from the initial stages of the reading process (in other words, the book before it is read) to the rereading of a beloved (or hated) book. This does not produce ten neat chronologies of reading and encounters-with-books, however, but rather the profusion of material alluded to above. In order to gain purchase on this material and to ready it for analysis, it was necessary to structure and organise it. In *Textual Preferences'* four chapters, I aim to tell a broad story of readerly engagement, from a consideration of the book as a *thing* to be read (the *what* of reading), to *where* that reading takes place, to *how* my narrators' read, to the *when* of reading. I concentrate firstly on my narrrators' interactions with the book-as-object, secondly, on the spaces of reading, thirdly, on their close-reading strategies, and lastly, on the temporal peculiarities of reading and experiences-with-books. This

thematic structure allows me to make productive connections between my narrators' differing accounts. At the same time, it allows space for more in-depth case studies from each narrator where most pertinent.

Focusing on the material object of the book, Chapter One begins by exploring some of the meanings books make for my narrators before, after, as well as or instead of being read. Examining the book's material and immaterial properties, its status in actual and more psychic or affective archives, I argue that talking about books can draw attention to their specific and strange ontological status in unnerving but compelling ways. Contrary to Price's observation that readers have become "numb to the look and feel of the printed page", this chapter argues that attention to queer reading histories brings the bodily and haptic aspects of reading strongly to the fore (*How to Do Things* 32). Reciprocities between textual and physical bodies resonate throughout the queer reading histories I have gathered, as textual engagements tip over into charged encounters with the material object of the book, and as my narrators make manifest their affective responses to books through their physical engagements with them. This first chapter concludes with a case study from one of my narrators, Kate, a (re)reading of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960) that surfaces and analyses other key narratives produced during the interview process: the affective, gestural, non-verbal and intersubjective. Bringing these two themes of materiality and embodiment together, I argue that there is something uniquely important about the engagement between (queer) bodies and books which an expanded mode of oral history analysis is well-placed to capture.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate the ways in which reading opens up or delimits a particular kind of space for queer and protoqueer readers: my narrators talk about books as "escape", of reading to "take you away", but reading also offers a set of critical tools for, in Kate's words, "getting [her] bearings", specifically in relation to sexuality and gender. Julia notes that in reading, "I found a space where I could be me". From the

private and domestic spaces of reading – the bedroom, for example – I move to a consideration of the metaphorical and imaginative reading spaces, using examples from Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* (1948), among other works. This chapter closes with a discussion of the spaces of bookshops and libraries. These take on particular significance for the queer reader who may have to negotiate the closed stack, the reserved stock list, the recalcitrant card catalogue, the helpful or intimidating librarian or bookseller. As Rohy puts it, finding and locating books can be so charged for the (proto)queer reader, and "shame, knowledge and arousal are so intertwined" that "arguably all visits to the HQ stacks, as they are named in the US Library of Congress system [the classmark for family; marriage; women and sexuality], constitute pornographic forays" (115).

Chapter Three opens with a discussion of queer readers' engagements with paratexts – what Angus Brown calls the "intricate and intuitive process of queer recognition" (29) and Hennegan refers to as finding "the 'right' book for me, however unlikely its disguise" (166). This "disguise" is a matter of dust jacket or design, cover illustration, publisher's colophon, précis, chapter heading, author photograph or biography. This chapter then moves from the paratextual to the textual, using specific examples from LGBTQ reading histories as case studies through which to examine some of the various processes and practices often grouped under the rubric of 'queer reading'. The first of these case studies is my narrator Amy's reading of Joanna Trollope's 1989 novel, *A Village Affair*. I then move on to a discussion of subtext, including more on Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*; and intertext, guided by Jo's recollections of reading a range of texts which enabled her to begin to construct a queer, trans identity.

Finally, Chapter Four uses recent work on the temporality of reading, such as Lupton's *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (2018) to investigate the ways in which books and reading enable thinking about queerness in

time. LGBTQ individuals self-consciously construct narratives of varying degrees of linearity. But books and reading also allow the reader to trouble both time, and identity, in deceptively complex ways. Relating the uses they made of narratives they encountered in childhood and adolescence to their own life narratives as diverse LGBTQ individuals, this chapter draws on work by Kathryn Bond Stockton and Judith [J. Jack] Halberstam to ask how reading and experiences-with-books have helped my narrators to negotiate and construct queer time. In articulating reading histories – in tracing particular textual affinities or ambivalences, for example – a narrator's protoqueer child-self might be made available to their adult self, while the oral history interview provides an opportunity for the various culturally unavailable queer subtexts of childhood reading to be recovered and recorded. My primary case studies here are Andy's engagement with Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Carol's rereading of Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did at School* (1873). Lastly, this chapter examines the use of the book as a mechanism for unfolding time in new ways, circling back to the material focus of Chapter One, while pointing to the potential of books and reading to enable queer continuity and futurity.

My conclusion brings these four chapters together to reflect on *why* LGBTQ adults' read and engage with books in the ways analysed above, spotlighting the role of reading and experiences-with-books in queer stories of survival. I evaluate my project as an interdisciplinary study, in terms of methods, findings and its place within the broader fields of queer oral history, reading history and adult-centred children's literature research. Finally, I propose new directions for oral historical work that aims to engage with LGBTQ lives and reading histories.

My intervention into the existing scholarship and critical writing on childhood, queerness, books and reading, then, is one which elicits and analyses memories of reading in childhood and adolescence, and brings readers and their books back into conjunction, within the space of the oral history interview, in order to tell a more

nuanced story about the several different uses of childhood and adolescent experiences-with-books and reading for LGBTQ individuals. In beginning the research that would become *Textual Preferences*, my motivation was both (privately) to unpick the knot of my own childhood identifications and attachments, and to test the relationship between queerness, books and reading in childhood and adolescence that I found being proposed – patchily, speculatively – by other theorists and critics, through attention to the reading histories of self-identified LGBTQ adults. In so doing, my aim was to bring to light a tensile web of queer representation and recognition within childhood and adolescent reading, a kind of substrate or ground on which adult identity was written. In this sense I position *Textual Preferences* as akin to projects such as Radstone's: "a rigorous intellectual exploration not just of the words on the pages of popular texts, but of the ways in which those texts mesh with our previously acquired cultural identities" (13).

Rather than presenting a series of 'findings' about my narrators, what I instead found was that the more I paid attention to individuals' stories, the more particular, granular and differentiated their narratives became. As Sedgwick states in *Epistemology of the Closet*, in her first axiom, "[p]eople are different from each other" (22). Rohy notes, too, "how insistently the vector of queer reading defies historiography, driven by a reader who finds her sexuality reflected, defined, or produced by a text that may only be queer in the context of that relation" (110). *Textual Preferences* is not a compendium of similar stories about readerly encounters with Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* or Forster's *Maurice.* It isn't Molly Bolt, protagonist of Rita Mae Brown's 1973 novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, "sitting in the bright yellow kitchen reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, laughing [her] head off" (84). It is, however, an attempt to write a history of queer reading informed by the multiple, various, cumulative and intimate relations between reader and book, those moments when sexuality is "reflected, defined or produced", however idiosyncratically (Rohy 110). In addition, it

is informed by those moments in which other aspects of queer selfhood, including ideas about embodiment, gender presentation, connectedness and community, age, self-image, self-acceptance and survival, are produced or informed by memories of childhood reading and experiences-with-books.

The shared story that emerges from what follows is a story of book-use and reading, and its rich intersection with the self-identification of non-normative sexuality or gender identity. The defining features of queer reading, according to Rohy's taxonomy, are "identity-formation, interpellation by prevailing language, the search for community, an education in cultural and sub-cultural signs, and the function of the material book as a medium of communication and exchange" (106). In what follows, I explore how these features present and are played out in these ten individuals' reading histories, joining the dots between anecdotal and abstract theorisations of queer reading through real readers' accounts. I develop Rohy's model of queer reading, adding a final category, concerned with books' ability to manipulate time, and the affordances of that for the queer reader, whose present is legitimated by memories of reading in the past, and whose future is made possible by reading in the present. Set against some of the more well-rehearsed stories about the ways in which queer identity is constituted through books and reading, *Textual Preferences* animates and articulates not only the hard-to-recover traces of reading as a practice – one which is social as well as private – but also the nontextual uses to which the book is put. Books, in these oral histories, shape their readers. They are also shaped in turn – by the physical wear and tear of reading and rereading, and by the multiple interpretive and affective demands made on them. *Reading* emerges as a practice and a set of strategies with particular resonance for LGBTQ readers; and *books* emerge as queer objects in their own right, able to trouble space and time.

To conclude, *Textual Preferences* makes an original contribution to knowledge in three ways: in terms of its conclusions, approach and the material on which it is

based. It suggests that attention to LGBTQ adults' oral histories of reading in childhood and adolescence can contribute significantly to understanding of the extratextual material, embodied, situated and temporal aspects of reading and experiences-with-books, as well as the textual. Further, that these accounts illuminate the strangeness of the book-as-object and the complexity of the hermeneutic process more broadly. In approach, *Textual Preferences* needles and troubles methodologies, concerned with silences, gaps, the unspoken and the unattended to. It intervenes in oral history, suggesting it as a particularly productive methodology for historians of reading and of the book. It also listens out for queer occurrences in the oral history interview, suggesting oral historians strive for a praxis which remains alert to sound in all its totality and messiness – including silence – as well as specifically to speech. Lastly, *Textual Preferences* draws on original material: a unique archive of audio and written outputs which document memories of reading in childhood and adolescence from an underrepresented constituency. The various paracanons recalled and reassembled by these ten LGBTQ individuals constitute a queer reading and book history which is both oral and material, tangible and intangible. Providing valuable insight into *what*, *where, how, when* and *why* these LGBTQ readers read in childhood and adolescence, these oral histories generate a unique aural and textual archive for future scholarly use. Here is the use I have made of them; I only hope I have done them justice.

Chapter One
"Foxed and careworn": The queer object of the book

"If there was an archive of me, this would have to be in it", Amy tells me: "It was there at the beginning – it's a formative book." Originally residing on a window-ledge, where only "certain books stayed", this book has travelled with her through "many, many moves. Always going up on the bookshelf". She "would never give it up", she confesses: "I kind of feel it would be wrong to get rid of it." "Sun-bleached", "bashed up", "foxed and careworn", the book in question is an established presence in Amy's private library. But there is something more, some immaterial, immanent quality to this particular volume. It exists, too, in another kind of collection, one that is far less tangible, though no less vital: Amy's archive of *herself*. The title to which Amy refers is Joanna Trollope's lesbian Aga saga *A Village Affair*, first published by Bloomsbury in 1989. "I was", she admits, "a little bit obsessed with that book, for a while". Yet Amy goes on to admit that she has not looked closely at Trollope's novel since she was seventeen. She doesn't even "take it down" off the shelf. Since her initial intense engagement with *A Village Affair*, another seventeen years will have passed – half her lifetime – before she will reread it in order to discuss it with me. "I probably would keep that book forever," Amy tells me towards the end of our second interview, "but never have read it again". But if we're not reading the books that are this important to us, these constitutive and defining holdings in our own private libraries, what is it, exactly, that we're doing with them? Why is a block of paper, ink and glue a thing to "keep [...] forever"? What do these books, shelved in both our material collections, and in less palpable collections, too – Amy's "archive of me" – do for, or to, us?

Leah Price argues against the "heroic myth […] that makes textuality the source of interiority, authenticity and selfhood" (*How to Do Things* 16). Books-as-objects, she suggests, are as vital to the construction of meaningful subjectivities as the texts

contained within them. Undoubtedly, the narrative elements of Trollope's novel enable Amy to construct her adult sense of self; examples of this recur throughout this thesis. However, it is also the book's form, its materiality – its marked and worn cover, its space-taking on window-ledge or bookshelf – which is, in Amy's own words, "formative". In gathering oral histories of childhood and adolescent reading from LGBTQ adults, I had imagined that readers would recall their childhood books in terms of content, characterisation, arresting episode. I found that, without exception, they also remembered experiences of the physical object of the book itself. My narrators describe the material specifics of their reading: the feel of the page, the smell of the paper, the texture of the binding. The important role played by childhood and adolescent reading in the formation of adult subjectivity and sexuality is also reading in a very material sense, recounted as an embodied engagement with an array of palpable papery artefacts. *A Village Affair* is, for Amy, a symbol of queer selfhood. It was "there at the beginning", she explains; and by "the beginning", she refers not to her earliest memories of reading and being read to (Enid Blyton's *Noddy*; Roger Hargreaves's *Mister Men*), or to the beginnings of her engagements with literacy (the "cereal packet", "the back of the toothpaste when you're brushing your teeth", "all the words that came on the television, including all the credits at the end of a programme"). Rather, "the beginning" is the point of her emergence as a sexual subject; the book was "there" as she began to inhabit more fully her fledgling lesbian identity. Amy read *A Village Affair* many times, and it has shaped her, as she has shaped it. It exists for Amy as both text and object, in material and immaterial form. Its "foxed" pages and "careworn" cover are marked by embodied acts of reading, bringing a consideration of the physical and haptic strongly to the fore, and yet it resonates too in Amy's psychic "archive". It is a striking example of the oddly dual properties of the book, and of the peculiar power which resides in the book-object for the LGBTQ reader.

My narrators shelve, collect, hide, destroy, stroke and carry books around; as Stephen Orgel observes, "there are other things to do with books besides read them" (5). The key proposal of this first chapter, therefore, is that oral *histories of reading* are also, and at the same time, oral *histories of the book.* In it, I concentrate on the interactions and experiences my narrators have with books, and the meanings that books make, *before* or *after*, *as well as* and *instead of,* their reading. Firstly, I show how my narrators situate the book-as-object within their accounts of reading. Talking about books reveals something of their particular and peculiar ontological status; a status which, I suggest, has become so naturalised as to resist articulation or description, and which has tended to be elided altogether in many critical and theoretical accounts of reading. Secondly, I examine some examples of embodied reading put forward by my narrators, showing that there is something uniquely important about the engagement between queer bodies and books, queer books and bodies. I conclude with a case study example that brings these two themes of materiality and embodiment together in the context of an oddly charged interview in which I discussed a (re)reading of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960) with one of my narrators, Kate. The oral histories that form the source material for this study reveal much about reading and subjectivity, but they also unexpectedly demonstrate that a book is a much stranger thing than I had anticipated, and one which requires us to think again about how we define and use it.

The book-as-object

In thinking through what books and reading do for us, why and how they matter, the book-as-object has increasingly come into focus as a thing to be theorised in its own right. Since the early 1980s, as Heather Love notes, there has been a distinct shift away from the primacy of close reading – the 'words on the page' in I.A. Richards' famous formulation – and from "texts to books", under the rubric the "new sociologies of literature" (373). Drawing on Price's useful survey of the field, "Reading Matter"

(2006), Love cites work by, among others, Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, Peter Stallybrass and Price, in histories of reading, analytical bibliography, book production, distribution and consumption (373). Increasingly, scholars are interested in the feel and smell of books, in how they have been handled and used, marked up and marked by readers; even in what readers may have left behind in books as signs of their engagement with or attachment to them. In more traditionally text-based literary and cultural studies too – especially in analyses which incorporate the anecdotal or autobiographical – the physical book has been quietly making itself felt.

"As a child reading under the sheets by the light of my red plastic EverReady torch," writes Sally Munt in a self-reflective introductory passage to her book on lesbian identity, *Heroic Desire*, "my habit was to seek out those heroic narratives in which suffering was eventually recognized and rewarded, and I wasn't choosy whether triumph was clothed in leather-bound editions or cheap, dog-eared, dirty paperbacks" (2). So far, so conventional: the tendency to elevate reading as a process and practice above the *thing* that is read is often an aspect of readerly self-construction. Asked to describe their reading child-selves, my narrators, too, are variously "totally absorbed" (Alice), "fanatical", "insatiable" (Amy), "obsessive" (Julia, Mark), "voracious" (Kate, Mark), "indiscriminate" (Kate), "engrossed" (Mary). Munt's prevailing interest here is in the heroic as an "instrumental model for lesbian culture"; and how various narrativisations of lesbianism enable the construction both of an "authentic personal history [...] loyal to the lesbian's own life trajectory and her specific felt needs" and a "pluralistic, multivalent self [...] based on intersubjectivity" (2). In other words, her focus is on the interplay between reader and narrative, rather than between reader and book-object. Her autobiographical introduction is merely an entry-point to a discussion of these issues in broader and less personal terms. However, while Munt may deny that material concerns had any real bearing on the pleasure she took in childhood reading, or on its uses to her child-self, the consonance of "clothed in

leather" and the cumulative force of 'cheap, dog-eared, dirty" combine to tell a somewhat different story. The niceties of bindings and stock, the marks made by previous readers and the physical evidence of repeated rereadings provide, in Munt's account, a specific locus for the "triumph" of narrative resolution she was looking for. Munt readily admits that she "always read [herself] out of emotional difficulty"; but reading is depicted here not only as a source of intellectual or existential succour, but of tactile, somatic comfort (1). This is a cosy cocooning in torchlit bedsheets; reading made manifest through the sensory conjunction of fabric, body heat, plastic, paper, leather, breath, grime. While it is overtly downplayed – Munt nonchalantly asserts that she "wasn't choosy" about the books she read, or the condition they were in – the look and feel of the book-object nevertheless emerges insistently from Munt's reading memory.

This turn to the book-as-object can be usefully contextualised by children's literature studies and the historiography of childhood, fields which have themselves been recentring readers' engagements with books as things, and with the materiality of readers' responses to texts – through attention to board books or pop-up books, or in tracing marginalia or inscriptions left by child readers, for example. Hannah Field notes that "children's literature often invites children to consume books with unique attention to their material properties"; young readers, she writes, are as likely to "gnaw on pages" as to "pore [...] over them" (3-4). Field's recent study of Victorian moveable books and the child reader provides an excellent survey of the existing scholarship on materiality and children's books; she develops work on moveable and 'novelty' books for children – those with tabs, flaps and folds – such as Peter Haining's *Movable Books: An Illustrated History* (1979) and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh's 2017 *Interactive Books: Playful Media before Pop-Ups* (5). In children's literature collections and archives, especially, the materiality of the book is recognised, and prized; books are classified and shelved alongside toys, games, and other artefacts, including what Karen Sánchez-

Eppler refers to as "child-made things" (8). In oral histories of childhood reading, too, the material specifics of reading and the object of the book come up – repeatedly, and persistently – as subjects for analysis. Wanted or unwanted, read or unread, books are gifts, rewards and heirlooms: physical entities that my narrators keep, collect and shelve, that they live with and among, that take up space, that they move from house to house. "My mother used to despair," remembers Andy, "she used to have to keep mending the seams of my pockets in my jackets, 'cos I crammed so many books into them." Of his earliest encounters with the printed page, Andy recalls that "I read a lot […] I always had a book, usually at least two books." He was "reading a lot", he tells me, "from a very early age." Yet these volumes are remembered as physically, rather than mentally stretching; and instead of bringing to mind details of plot, episode or character in response to my initial questioning, the impressions they left were more material than intellectual. Books *as objects* act as a kind of ballast for Andy, providing also a vital orienting function. He comments that, "I would feel lost without a book, *even if I wasn't reading it*, and even now, I need to have a book with me" (my emphasis).

Demonstrably, then, books continue to matter, as Price comments, "even, or perhaps especially, when they go unread" (*How to Do Things* 2). In the house in which Jo grew up, for example, there were "loads of books and nobody read them". From an upper-middle class background, Jo lived as a child in "a kind of English country house" which "literally had a room called the library". Some sixty years later, she still has "[j]ust outside the door here", a "case full of books" that her grandfather "had won as prizes in Wellington College […] so many prizes that the estate carpenter […] built a bookcase for them." These books constitute "an important part" of Jo's identity, she tells me, although "I haven't read any [...] actually," she confesses, "because they're really fucking dull." Mary recalls "that you had books, that you lived with books, that you bought books with your pocket money, with your Christmas money, that you were

given books". Growing up, Alice's mother owned a bookshop: "I think we were moving around with something like thirty thousand books. Some lunatic amount." The sitting room "was not really sittable in because it was full of books"; "[e]very hallway, every toilet is just stacked with piles of books". When her parents died she "had to fill two skips with books" deemed unsellable objects, primarily, rather than texts. She refers wryly to "*Manson's Textbook of Virology* […] along with *How to Make Bead Necklaces*" stacked in piles like bricks, or filling skips like so much rubble.

The book, you might say, has been under our noses all along. But it is in these oral accounts that books' physical presence takes shape and significance; writing or speaking about the importance of books in childhood, particularly, seems to throw their properties as objects into relief. To begin to analyse this material from the perspective of literary scholar, rather than book historian, can be a dizzying experience, so strange does it seem at first to consider the object of the book purely as a thing, divorced entirely from its textual content. Or, perhaps, it is that within the confines of the disciplinary boundaries of English Literature we have become – unnaturally – unused to thinking about textual content as a matter of ink-on-paper; instead it is experienced as intangible, free-floating, semi-sacred – untouchable, both metaphorically and literally. One fundamental issue thrown up as a product of using oral history to talk about books and reading is the interchangeability of the two terms *book* and *text*, particularly when crossing between academic and non-academic registers. While, outside the fields of book history and material text studies, it is conventional in academic discourse for literary critics and theorists to speak of *a text*, rather than *the book*, the converse is true for my narrators, talking more colloquially about books and reading. In fact, the word 'text' only occurs in nine out of eighteen interviews. Several of these usages occur through my own interventions, as interviewer, in one specific question relating to emerging critical awareness, where I ask specifically about "analysing texts" in the classroom. Of the usages of the term by

my narrators themselves, it is only those accustomed to discussing literature as an academic discipline who, in "encounter[ing] a character" in a text, as Kate does, or "get[ting] inside" a text, or considering "the pleasure of the text", as Julia does, invoking Roland Barthes, are referring to their own reading of fiction. Other usages are generically delimited, for example, "set texts" (Mary), "scientific texts" (Alice), "religious", "Christian" or "devotional" texts (Eileen and Julia).

Price notes how "book" and "text" perform an ongoing dance of mutual submission: "one term appears sometimes as contained within the other, sometimes as antithetical to it" (*How to Do Things* 4). Price and others have demonstrated that scrutiny of the *text* by literary theorists has led to a gradual slipping out of focus of the book as a material thing, or object, with a consequent myopia regarding considerations of the commercial and social aspects of books and their material production. However, JA Appleyard suggests that for younger readers, something of the reverse happens, that school-age students begin to see that "stories are also texts", that "they are not just objects" (16). For Appleyard, *text* and *object* circulate and encompass each other as terms in much the same way that text and book do in other theoretical work, with no less ambiguity. The object, for Appleyard, is the story*book*, which invites pleasurable immersion or critical reflection (in much the same way as Price would see the text as doing in other accounts); an understanding of the book's *textual* aspect instead turns books into material "objects that require us to think about the conditions of their production, their effect on us, the issues they raise in the world of contemporary intellectual discourse, and the kinds of meaning they can plausibly claim to offer" (16). The text-as-object, then, for Appleyard, invites the kinds of questions that for Price are provoked by the book-as-object. For G. Thomas Tanselle the distinction is between intangible literature and tangible text. He argues that because the medium of the book is language, rather than paper and ink (in itself a questionable assertion in a discussion which focuses on printed books rather than electronic or audiobooks), a work of

literature is an intangible, verbal work. "Copies of printed books", he states, are "tangible guides to the reconstruction of intangible works" – much as transcripts are tangible guides to the reconstruction of the oral history interview (xii). These examples help to illuminate that 'text' and 'book' are contested and overlapping terms; not coterminous but rather both subjects and objects which continually contain each other.

Indeed, the 'thingness' of the book is repeatedly reinforced and destabilised by my narrators. Towards the end of our second conversation, Carol conjures a hypothetical child reader, a granddaughter. "I'd want her to have proper books", Carol tells me, beginning to assemble a canon which includes Noel Streatfeild's *White Boots* (1951) and *Ballet Shoes* (1936), and Alcott's *Little Women* (1868): "proper, concrete, paper books". In its slippage between adjective and noun, "concrete" here stresses the perceived authenticity of the "proper", palpable, physical book, as opposed to a virtual, electronic text. For Carol to consider these "proper" books suitable for her implied reader, they must fit expectations both in terms of their perceived gender-appropriate *content* – Carol wryly admits that "it is absolutely the case that I wouldn't buy my grandson *Little Women* […] Isn't that awful?" – and in terms of their physical *form*. For Andy, the book can also be aural. Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) is "very verbal. It is the sound of the book that […] when I read the page […] I hear it in my head". Loosing the narrative from between its covers, for Andy *The Wind in the Willows* "really should be read aloud"; so much so, he claims that "it doesn't exist for me in a book", at all. His "recollection of this book" is "not as a physical object" but rather, of "having it read to me and me reading it to other people". For Andy, "spoken word" is "part of reading": "sometimes I even read books aloud to myself. It was just the sound of the words, as well as, as well as anything else." Eileen tells me that "her acquaintance with a lot of classics" – by which she means children's literary classics – "came through film. And TV. So *Twenty Leagues Under the Sea*, *Ivanhoe*, *Robin Hood*, *The*

Secret Garden, *Three Musketeers*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*." She "wasn't even conscious that they were books." Mark re-encounters Ronald Welch's historical time-slip novel *The Gauntlet* (1951) as an ebook on Amazon Kindle. Mark comments on his unexpected "nostalgic emotional response" to rereading Welch's text. "It did kind of surprise me", he explains. It was, he says, "a bit like […] emptying out the loft and you find a toy that you'd played with twenty years ago […] that kind of feeling." His "surprise" is due to the fact that it is demonstrably *not* a toy that he has cathected in this fashion, but a book. "I don't think you necessarily invest that, in a book", he explains, "in the same way as you might a physical object". For Carol, then, a book is a concrete *thing* made of paper; for Andy, an aural narrative separable from its physical body; for Eileen, classic literature existed first as film; while for Mark, toys and books occupy two distinct categories, object and not-object. Yet if "a book" is something both more than, and *other* than, "a physical object", what exactly, we might ask, is it?

Books, it appears, are unexpectedly hard to classify. Is a book – even the ebook – a physical object like any other? Is the book-as-object read alongside or instead of the book-as-text? Is the book an edition of a text, or is the text, whether print or pixel, one of the material substances that constitutes the book? To ask "how – even whether – books differ from other kinds of object", as Price does, poses several conceptual challenges (*How to Do Things* 6). As McCaffery and Nichol observe, the "constants" of narrative prose – that it will contain lines of text that flow and follow on from each other in a columnar arrangement on the page, and that these pages are sequentially arranged one after another, "are seldom questioned" (60). With these constants in place, readers can experience the fluid dematerialisation modelled by Francis Spufford in his bibliomemoir *The Child that Books Built* (2002), as he describes the process of learning to read: "writing had ceased to be a thing – an object in the world – and *become* a medium, a substance you look through" (65). Yet any changes to our ability to access that narrative in the usual way – for example, typographical experiments which

break up the expected flow or direction of text, unusual bindings, or unfamiliar formats – uncomfortably and unavoidably reveal this conditioning, causing us to look anew at the surface of the page and the shape and size of the book as object (60). The codex book has become so commonplace that to unpick its multiple significations is tricky. However, this is, I argue, something that oral history as a methodology is particularly well placed to do. Oral histories of reading can radically defamiliarise the book, as Mark's speculations about the book as something other than a "physical object" attest. This is unnerving, but necessary: it is only through interrogating the book's ontological specificity, as both medium and message, object and text, that we will be able to assess the source and significance of its "numinous and resistant" power, in Sedgwick's phrase (*Tendencies* 3). For Sedgwick, this power is intimately related to the queer, to books' ability to provide her with what she was so intently attempting to find out about "ideas, the world, myself, and (in various senses), my kind" (4). It is a power she reports trying to "appropriate" through close attention to how books work, both as objects and as texts, through what she describes as a "visceral near-identification" with them (3). For the remainder of this section, I analyse my narrators' engagements with the book-as-object, not in terms of the uses they make of books in relation to their LGBTQ identities as such, but to demonstrate their own visceral attachments to and identifications with the physicality and materiality of books, and to point to the peculiarities of the book as an object which may, in its very oddness, inhabit the category of *queer*.

Reflecting on her memories of reading in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed comments that Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) was "[o]ne of the first lesbian books I read, it is for me a very happy object. I loved it" (115). Reading this for the first time, I was struck by Ahmed's choice of noun; but relating to a book *as an object,* as I came to realise through analysis of my narrators' accounts, is no less nuanced or emotionally invested a process than responding to the book-as-text. Kate, rereading Rumer Godden's *The Diddakoi* (1972) for our second conversation, echoes

this in a more melancholic fashion, noting that "it's a shame" that she was unable to find her childhood copy of the book. "I really wanted to […] see it again," she explains. "[I]t would have been nice to read […] exactly the same object.". Eileen tells me that she would like "to put on record" her reading of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories (1887-1927), which she "read and reread endlessly"; her discussion, however, is not of their content but the form in which she encountered them: "I had a volume *that thick* […] that eventually fell apart […] it had spare pages that had come out, stuck into it." For Mark, the electronic edition of *The Gauntlet,* unbound from the comfortingly familiar physicality of the codex, becomes an unexpected site of emotional investment and affective response ("I don't think you necessarily invest that, in a book"). As he puts it, "[t]here's more of a feeling of a book, in a book." By extension, we understand there to be more capacity to feel *about* a book, or *in response to* a book, when such a volume has the physical presence and dimensions to hold such feelings.

The desire to possess a book is as much a desire for its physical form as for its content – or more so. Mark designates Ronald Welch's *The Gauntlet* as a "special" book, expressing a wish to "have a copy on the shelf". Kate gives the example of asking for George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) for a Christmas present one year: "I wanted [it …] and I got it". Finding it tedious, she gave up actually *reading* it on reaching the second chapter, subsequently avoiding it for the next fifteen years until forced to finish it for work. "Even then," she admits, "I skipped bits." As Walter Benjamin comments, the "non-reading of books" is "characteristic of collectors" (62). On the bookshelf, however, the unfinished or unread book still signifies. Mark, for example, describes "sets of Shakespeare and sets of Dickens and stuff like that, that had been on the shelf because they looked good rather than necessarily read by anybody". Ostentatious display of books then, is also about positioning in class terms: "being middle class, […] all about show and […] looking good, and you know, […] demonstrating that we have lots of money".

This impetus towards preservation – sometimes over and above reading, or divorced from an affective attachment to the actual *text* of the book – and a concomitant preoccupation with the bookshelf as a means of storage and display, is on show throughout these oral histories. "For a collector," claims Benjamin, "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects" (67). "I had a massive collection of books", Julia tells me, "a big bookshelf full [...] in my room. That was my thing." Issues of ownership are critical here: not just of books themselves, but of reading as a practice, and of other bookish practices and behaviours: of reading, Kate explains that "I enjoyed it, and I thought that it was kind of, my thing, so I [...] had some sort of ownership of it". Both reading and collecting, in Kate and Julia's accounts, are practices refined into idiosyncrasies, "thing[s]" particularly associated with their personae that they could attach to and invest in. Andy describes himself as "a completist", a term more often used in record-collecting: "I would find an author or a series [...] and I would read all of them", he explains, giving examples ranging from Michael Bond's *Paddington Bear* series (1958-2014), to the complete works of Tove Jansson and PD James. "I'd like to finish an author", he adds. Amy, however, talks in our first conversation about her affinity with Jansson's character the Hemulen, in the *Moomin* series (1945-70); in our second interview she uses an exchange between the Hemulen and Moomintroll to distinguish between owning and collecting, reporting how Moomintroll diagnoses the Hemulen's consternation at finishing his stamp collection: "you were a collector but now you're just an owner, and that's not nearly so much fun." Amy collects Hergé's *Tintin* series (1929-76), yet while she has read the series "many times over", there is one notable exception: "There's one that I have not read, which is *Tintin and the Picaros.*" Amy is very clear that she has "not read it deliberately". She tells me that "I don't own it and I own all the other ones", and, moreover, "I don't own that one because once I've read it, I'll be finished. So I'm not reading that one." Kate goes on to describe how, as a teenager, she "developed this sort

of slightly aspirational relationship to bookshelves." "It wasn't just about what I was reading", she explains, but "about what I wanted to own and what I wanted to have."

That this is a particular set of behaviours, as opposed to simply exhibiting the natural relation between book and shelf, is displayed most clearly in Eileen's account. It differs from that of my other narrators, all of whom had access to books from an early age, whether they identified as working class, middle class or upper-middle class, and whether or not they came from families in which reading was validated or shared, in one important way. Eileen grew up between two working-class family homes in Lancashire; that of her Scottish parents, and her 'Aunty Florrie' and 'Uncle Jim', who took care of her in childhood. She doesn't remember "picking up a book, *per se*, until I was probably about ten or eleven. "There weren't any books […] in either household," Eileen explains, "[…] we didn't have bookshelves or books anywhere." The exception was "Sunday School prizes […] with these colour illustrations in them." However, not only did Eileen's family subvert the usual expectations for engaging *with* books – "I don't think I ever opened any of them," Eileen admits, "because nobody ever did" – but they also maintained heterodox conventions of display. The Sunday School prizes she mentions were "actually hidden away", whereas shelves "were for tools and ornaments, glasses and stuff like that. They were not for books." Even at the time of our first interview, Eileen explains that there are "precious few" books in her (then elderly) mother's house: "shelves of four ornaments and pictures. She wouldn't dream of having books on the shelf."

Books operate for my narrators, to develop Price's terms, as "bridges" and "barriers" between people, including, I suggest, between past and present selves (*How to Do Things* 14). They are material containers *and* carriers of meaning, as well as, in Heike Bauer's phrase, "conduits of feeling" (268). Books can also act as unexpected channels of connection. Carol remembers during the course of our conversation that on her passing of the Eleven Plus, her father bought her "a six or eight volume of Jane

Austen, and a six or eight volume of Charles Dickens". Carol is unequivocal that "I hated my dad and he hated me." At the time, she was "deeply resentful" of these books, "because I wanted a record player." However, she has kept them close for nearly half a century, "in fact I noticed them this morning, 'cos I can see them from my bed". With hindsight, Carol recognises her father's gift as "his validation of my love of reading." Of course, she adds, "he would never have said that, you know. There wasn't that language in those days." Rather, the necessary words were contained within the covers of the Austen and Dickens volumes that she has "kept […] forever" and "will never ever chuck […] away." For Mary, books *connect* generations, in ways that don't necessarily have anything to do with reading. Mary uses Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), specifically, to trace links between herself, her mother and her mother's mother: "three generations now of women in this family who love children's literature and […] will still sort of have a connection with the books they read as a child." This connection is with *books* as well as with *literature*, books as objects to "look out" for, "keep hold of" and physically replace*:* the women in Mary's family "will still sort of look out for them, keep hold of them, or get a new copy […] if you don't have the old one."

The space books take up is both physical and mental, but the spaces they leave unoccupied are also worthy of scrutiny. Alice recalls reading Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series (1942-62), yet describes, with some anxiety, how "they disappeared": "I looked for them, I thought I had them, and I looked for them". "Someone," she tells me, "who I suspect could be my mother, probably got rid of them because she thought they weren't very good literature". Reflecting in our second interview, Mary comments that our first conversation sent her "back to the shelves." She "started to look and think about all the other books that I had read as a child" that she was unable to find there, and that had remained unnamed in our discussion. After rereading Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Jo of the Chalet School* (1926), Mary wants "to find space" in her life "to read the entire *Chalet School* series" and is compelled to "go to the bookshops now, and try and

fill in all the gaps" of the books she was unable to read as a child. For Mary, books are figured as almost anthropomorphised subjects, which she must "take back", "repatriate" and "liberate" from her mother's shelves, in order to "look after" them herself. "My mother's shelf is going to have a very large gap on it," Mary asserts, fiercely and protectively, "because I'm going to go and get them and take them all and bring them home."

Alternatively, books-as-objects can become sites of confusion, shame or resentment, symbols of interpersonal incomprehensions and misreadings. Encouraged to read "science books about insects and things […] which you can barely lift", Alice "didn't understand a word"; she returns to them in our second interview, "these huge tomes on insects" which don't "make any sense at all", "I can't read those bug books". Laden with parental expectation, this reading material is overwhelming not only in its content but also in its form, and in what it signifies: an assumed competence in biology and Latin; further, an ill-defined, mysterious sense that to understand "the bug book" is "to learn to be proper". Such connotations adhere to and cluster also around H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886), a book Alice later describes in terms of its content as "actually extraordinarily boring." The book, for Alice "is my grandmother"; she feels "the book has been haunting me for all of these years". "I look at the book and I see Gran", Alice explains. "The book is, she's right there in front of me." "She's criticising me, she's telling me off," she continues. "I feel bad that I'm not looking at the bug book, I can't write to her in Latin, I'm the, the second child having taken everybody away from the wonderful other family who are really great, and […] so I hate the book as well." The physical object of the book must bear the weight of these multiple extratextual associations. As Alice complains, "[l]ooking at it [the book] is so complicated".

Even the imagined book is defined, for some of my narrators, by its (im)material properties. Andy, despite his recollection of *The Wind in the Willows* as primarily an aural experience, "something that I said and that I heard", thinks carefully

about its physical counterparts. For our conversation, he read "a Wordsworth cheap two quid edition with a picture of Ratty on the front", yet the edition he recalls from childhood is a "green hardback", *The Kenneth Grahame Book* (1932); an anthology containing *The Wind in the Willows*, which was owned by his parents. It was "quite a big book", with "the author's signature in gold in one corner" and "no illustrations in it at all". Andy is very clear that "that is not how people think of *The Wind in the Willows*." He conjures here an archetypal, imagined book existing somewhere in the public consciousness, one volume, with the "canonical" EH Shepherd illustrations, that again, Andy claims "people associate it [the book] with." Such attachments to the material text, and such specificity even of the imaginatively invoked book, are not applicable across the board. Carol, for example, claims that it is "extremely unlikely" that she might still have her "very old original copy" of *Little Women*, and "[a]nyway", she adds, "I don't care". Similarly, she says of Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872) that "I don't have, in my head, a concrete, lodged, oh my god, this is what *What Katy Did* looks like". Instead, her memories of the text, specifically the character of Katy Carr, were imaginatively remediated into her "sexual fantasy library" and "video library", as I discuss further in the final chapter of this thesis.

This close interweaving of the material and immaterial is further made explicit by Amy, in her discussion of Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* (1950). Her "memories and associated memories" are "so entangled": threads include her "old copy" of the book, the "same Puffin edition that I first read at school", the "very vivid memory of physical location", of "sitting on the floor in the corridor reading it", but also of watching the television adaptation with her mother, of reading the book aloud as an adult, in bed with her partner, and the extratextual associations she has with the book, as "somebody who is really into Tove Jansson and her story and her life and her work as an adult". The book, for Amy, exists as a physical object: her aforementioned "old copy" is located securely in space – "I could look at it quickly on my shelf, I know

exactly where it is" – and has strongly delineated physical memories associated with it. It also exists as a more intangible text, remembered in terms of story, episode and character, and remediated in various ways as something visual and aural. Amy's metaphorical conceptualisations of her relationship with *Finn Family Moomintroll* are themselves resolutely material. She considers the various aspects of her connection to the book to be the "building blocks" which help to construct her perspective as a reader. "I have lots of layers of relationship with this book and sometimes it's hard to kind of pick them apart", she explains. "It's quite a three-dimensional sense I have of me and this book, now."

Just as my narrators' accounts of their experiences-with-books draw attention to the 'thingness' of the book, they also draw attention to the printed book as a technology. Mary, for example, has "quite vivid memories of certain picture books" – she mentions Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and John Vernon Lord and Janet Burroway's *The Giant Jam Sandwich* (1972) – from when she was "under five", before she had learned to read at school. Her memories are "not just having them read to me but […] looking at [them] myself". She explains that "sitting with a book and understanding how it worked, turning the pages, was something that I knew really young". Books can be looked at, held, touched, their component parts moved around, and most importantly, they can be *understood* as things – all without being read. Andy, too, separates being able to understand books as objects from being able to read independently. He recalls the child's active participation in being read to, commenting that "being told a story isn't learning a story, it's going through it and knowing when the pages get turned over". For Andy, the role played here by the child is "part of the act of reading and the act of storytelling in childhood"; he differentiates this "going through" and "knowing" about a book from more interpretative acts of meaning-making, or as he puts it, "reading books to find out what happens in them". Neither type of engagement with the book is elevated above the other, however; merely they are

each appropriate at different ages and for different competences. In my narrators' accounts, books signify as both objects *and* texts. Experiences-with-books as objects are, for my narrators, afforded a significance in parallel with their experiences of *reading*, of navigating a text in order to interpret (or cathect) it.

Carol remembers her grandfather's collection of encyclopaedias, rendering their size both verbally and gesturally: "huge things, like, you know, this big, this tall – […] your recorder can't hear this! – […] like rows and rows and rows of them." Carol directly links the size of the books to their implied adult readership. According to the logic of Carol's reading child-self, it seems that the bigger the book, the older the intended audience: she recalls "these mega, really, really, really huge encyclopaedias for adults and beyond". Size here is hyperbolically exaggerated, as is the idea of an age-category consisting of adults "and beyond", a growth figured as potentially unending. The capacious material dimensions of these volumes seem proportionate to their extensive, even infinite, subject matter; these encyclopaedias are "[a]bout everything". This eclecticism – "Greek gods, to reptiles, to this and that" – focuses on the readerly play of attention from topic to topic, what McCaffery and Nichol refer to as the "page's non-sequential storage qualities": the capacity of the reference work organise information into "physical storage units", which, being activated in a different way to continuous prose narrative, cause the reader to engage differently with the page (62). Of Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, Andy explains that "there are odd bits in the book where poems appear and the margins sort of get down to where a poem is and then it gets back up to the full page." This is, for Andy "an important feature of the book." Yet his account unexpectedly privileges the page over the poem: instead of the printed text exerting itself upon the surface of the paper, it is the page here that seems to expand and retract in order to accommodate poetry's line breaks, "the margins […] get down" and then "back up".

Andy also uses size to imply readership, and to emphasise the nontextual uses to which the physical book can be put. *The Wind in the Willows*, for example, is "set out like a children's book": it can be "held easily in the hand", it is "an easy book to carry around and to read", whereas Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy is "quite difficult. It's quite hard to read in bed, and it's very heavy when you're cycling." Andy's comments are perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek, but the correspondences between the two texts as "easy" and "difficult", respectively, and their differing formats bears acknowledgement. "Easy" to "carry around" is *also* "easy […] to read"*;* a "difficult book" is "hard to read", but *also* "hard to read in bed" and "very heavy". That these are not just, or not only, figures of speech, but practical considerations that impact on a book's ability to be read, or likelihood of being read, reinforces the point that the materiality of the book must not be overlooked (as Andy says of *The Wind in the Willows*, "the look of it is quite important"). Andy is attuned from an early age to bibliographical concerns of the edition, the editorial process, and the material transmission and progression of texts, something he attributes to "reading the Bible fairly young." "It got me thinking," he explains, "there's the version you're told and there's the full version." When Andy "first discovered the unabridged versions of Dickens and *Robinson Crusoe* and books like that", he "felt cheated": "when I was a kid, I was given these books and I was told, you're reading *Robinson Crusoe*, and I wasn't! I was reading this sort of Bowdlerised kiddies version." He "felt condescended to, as if I'd not been considered worthy", as if "I'd wasted my time." Since then, Andy has made a concerted effort to read always "the most complete version of any book I could possibly find." Andy talks at length about the different editions of *Gormenghast* he has read and owned over his lifetime, from the 1950s "library editions" he first encountered as a teenager in the 1970s, to the "Penguin paperback of the three volumes" he owned in his twenties, to the "one volume edition" that he purchased in the "80s or 90s" and had bound in "embossed […] plastic covers", to, finally, the centenary edition celebrating Mervyn Peake's birth, "the

complete four volumes in one […] a lovely edition", which he bought on its publication in 2011. In retracing his reading experience over the course of our conversations, Andy is "thinking very much physically of how these books were", he explains. Andy remembers "discovering Dostoyevsky", and again, it is a revelation as material as it is textual or intellectual: "they were all in the same binding, these big hardbacks in the library." Amy, describing her beloved Jansson books, catalogues them as meticulously as any archivist. "I've got it in my flat now, with all the other Tove Janssons," Amy says of her original copy of Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll,* "and they're almost all the same edition, this Puffin edition". She enumerates their publishing history: "[t]his one is from 1986, but it was first published by Puffin in 1961", she explains. "[A]nd then there were so many reprints. Twice in some years – twice in 1974, twice in 1983." She organises her collection with a curator's eye: "almost all of my Moomin books are from this Puffin series, apart from one which is older […] It sticks out because it has a different cover design." For many of my narrators, then, attuned to bindings and to bookplates, to publishing history and to paratext, the material text and the book-as-object *matter*, signifying in their accounts just as vibrantly as their imaginative engagements with narrative.

Textual interpretation and physical format are, therefore, inextricably enmeshed. The flipside of reminiscences that touch on implied readership, genre, and visual texts, therefore, is a parallel narrative concerning such issues as the weight and heft of the printed book, typography, reproduction, layout, the use of space on the page. As readers, my narrators – admittedly, some more than others – are at once positioned as literary critics *and* analytical bibliographers. Their transactions with the printed page engineer an exposé of the workings of the "book-machine", in McCaffery and Nichol's phrase: the book as a technology for "storing information", with an ink-and-paper "mechanism" which is "activated when the reader picks it up, opens the covers and starts reading it" (60). As such, my narrators variously animate the ways in which

books are bound by, and exceed their materiality. It is often the unexpected and perhaps even unintended turn of phrase that brings out these peculiarly dual properties of the book. Carol, enthusing over Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and its impact on her emerging feminist politics, remembers reading it "cover to cover to cover to cover to cover". Her exuberant recollection of the reading experience could be read as folding several contiguous reading experiences into one, back to back; as redirecting the narrative flow; or as metaphorically fanning or splaying the codex structure into a continuous concertina, her imaginative engagement with the book's inspirational content overspilling and multiplying its physical form into proliferative, generative excess. The containment of narrative prose within the covers of a book, and the reader's activation of or interaction with that narrative, is revealed in these oral accounts as more complex and more strange than it is often given credit for. I turn now to an investigation of the ways in which my narrators' LGBTQ identities further inflect their engagements with the book as physical and material object.

Books and bodies

"Book-lovers", writes Holbrook Jackson in his *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1930), "achieve a peculiar, a rich sufficiency, an extraordinary delight, by stroking their books" (789). The "smooth back of a fair old volume is an irresistible temptation"; they "long to hold and fondle a favourite" (789). The pleasures of reading are equated with the pleasures of the flesh. According to Jackson, "books yearn sometimes" for "tender reciprocity" (789): they "like to be felt" (794). This is by no means a conventional viewpoint. In her survey "Reading: The State of the Discipline", Price cites Armando Petrucci's chapter in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier's *A History of Reading in the West* (1995), "showing that the emergence of the public library has trained readers to efface their own bodies: the proper thing to put on tables is books, not feet; pages must not be touched with dirty hands or gummy fingers" (309). Price further argues that in

the post-1850 public library, there is no "looking, listening, touching, tasting, smelling"; books are supposed, ideally, to "deaden", rather than to "stimulate" the senses (*How to Do Things* 31). For my narrators, however, the bodily aspects of reading are brought strongly to the fore. "I would like the feel of books, and old books, and manuscripts, and bindings," Andy comments, although he "never bought books just because of that." Of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946-1959), Andy says, "I remember borrowing the books from the library with the yellowed pages and the smell of library books, and where I was when I read them". The look, feel and smell of books' raw materials – paper, ink and glue – and the physical placement of the body of the reader in relation to these indubitably tactile and sensory objects is heightened in his account. Price cites Elaine Scarry, who posits that there is little *sensory* response provoked by "verbal art", as Scarry has it (by which she is, in fact, referring to print, rather than literature, as Price astutely points out), and that haptic and tactile reading responses are "'not only irrelevant but even antagonistic to the mental images that a poem or novel'" produces ("Reading Matter" 11-12). The *literary critic* may have been taught to "filter out the look, the feel, the smell of the printed page", as Price notes, but my narrators, as examples of everyday readers, demonstrate a messier interrelation of sensory and imaginative engagement (*How to Do Things* 11).

Such behaviours as catalogued by Price and Jackson have been increasingly discouraged – or perhaps, merely metaphorically displaced. The very concept of literary *taste* is a good example of this. Indeed, sensory metaphors used to relate experiences-with-books and reading seem to cluster persistently around themes of hunger and desire, consumption and consummation. Julia remembers, aged six, "reading a *Secret Seven* book in the back of the car, and just eating it up". She mentions a "really great English teacher" who "just fed" her with books, showing her around the school library: "this, like, sweet shop, for me […] it had everything". Jo "devoured books"; Eileen describes her voracious appetite for Agatha Christie novels: "I went

through a phase of […] trying to eat it […] rather than enjoy it […] fantastic." In other queer oral histories and reading histories, the more closely narrators and authors relate their appetite for books to their emerging sexuality, the more this hunger is coded as sexual rather than gastronomic. "I'm sexually quite hopeless, really," confesses Rosanna Hibbert, born in 1932 and interviewed in the late 1980s for the Hall Carpenter Oral History Project. "I've never had the luck to have a good sexual relationship. I'm afraid of my own body, and therefore, I suppose, afraid of others." For Rosanna, sexual confidence arises from encounters between altogether different sheets: "I wasn't afraid in the abstract. If I came across any books that had lesbianism, I would swallow and gobble." Lynch, on first encountering Radclyffe Hall and then the lesbian pulp fiction writers of the 1950s – "[a]t last! Lesbians!" – "devoured" these books (40). Then, "always hungry" for further literary representation of her life, "yearned for more substance" (41). She describes "searching for my nourishment like a starveling, grabbing at any crumb that looked, tasted, or smelled digestible" (42). When she manages to locate books with queer content, she "savor[s]" them alone (43). In a similar vein, Wayne Koestenbaum writes of the gay male reader's "hunger for textual gayness *as if it were real*" (167). I argue that it is this slippage between the metaphorical and the literal that the experience of the LGBTQ reader is particularly well placed to illuminate, and that queer reading histories enable a re-materialisation both of the body of the reader and the body of the book.

Reading *as a process* is often metaphorically figured as relentlessly physical within these oral histories. Eileen "snatch[es] a bit of *Readers' Digest"* – itself termed "pre-masticated reading" by McCaffery and Nichol (63). Alice recalls being "dragged into the book". Carol is "gripped" by her rereading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*: "I was absolutely and completely gripped", she tells me. "I couldn't tear myself away." Kate, sceptical about re-encountering a childhood book in adulthood, "didn't expect it to grab me at all":

> I expected it to be very predictable, and, um, kind of one dimensional. I expected to go back to it and find that it was, um, a very quick and easy read, and very much like a children's book that wouldn't involve me at all, any more. So I expected it to be very, very simple. And, kind of, sort of removed, now, from [...] my kind of reading experience.

She is proved conclusively wrong. 'It was brilliant!" she acknowledges. "I loved it. I got really emotional." In this way, metaphors of physicality – being 'grabbed' – emerge as affective bodily response: "there was a bit where if I hadn't been on a bus", Kate admits, "I might have cried a little bit."

The "canon of literature for a gay kid", writes Kennicott, is a "still mostly forbidden body of work" (n. pag.). The "body of work" is another familiar metaphor to which we have become somewhat immune; much as, Price notes, we are "numb[ed]" to the "look and feel of the printed page" (*How to Do Things* 32). For queer readers, however, it seems these are not just, or not always, or only, metaphors: the relations between bodies, and the relations between bodies and books, both so often socially and culturally circumscribed, mean that these metaphors leak into the material, "real" world of the book-as-object, the library catalogue, the bookshop counter. LGBTQ readers desire representation, as Koestenbaum explains, they enact desire as a reading practice, but they also desire the book-as-object, the body of the book, and further, they equate their own bodies with the textual bodies which represent them. For Alice, a particular board book from childhood is, materially, "like a sort of comfort blanket, I can stroke it", and yet she is unable to articulate quite why: "I don't know […] It's strange […] I couldn't tell you what it is about." It comes to represent some of the homeliness and familiarity Alice was forced to give up when starting boarding school as a child, a repressive environment where "you're not going to be reading *Doctor Dan the Bandage Man* in your bed because you'll get beaten up". The violence displayed towards Alice's child-self becomes aligned, in her memories, with potential violence towards the book: "you'll get beaten up anyway, but you'd get the book thrown around as well". The book is as vulnerable as Alice. Eileen's father, alienated by his daughter's

class-crossing reading habits, would "pick things up that I was reading and, and flick through and throw it down". Diana Chapman, quoted here as part of the edited collection of lesbian life stories from the Hall Carpenter archive, twins her own birth with another kind of reproduction: "I was born round about the same time as *The Well of Loneliness* was going to the printers, I think, which was the 3rd of May, 1928, in Bristol…" (45). Book and reader *correspond*, in Diana's example.

Books emerge from the oral histories of reading I have gathered as objects to be touched and held. My narrators share a desire to make manifest the affective impact of the book, and to leave a record of their reading experience: marked by the book, they mark it in return. As we discuss her rereading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), for example, Carol tells me that, "I've folded that page over, it clearly touched me." Her physical engagements with the text form an alternative reading record, traces of her emotional responses transferred to the page: "I turned this page over, that must have been significant […] I might have turned it over because I'm really shocked." Amy refers to the butch-femme erotica that she read as a teenager and still keeps on her shelves as "pretty well thumbed". These haptic responses to books are strikingly imbued with longing. For example, despite not recognising *The Gauntlet* as "a physical object", Mark describes it (even in its electronic form) as a thing with weight and material substance, that is appealing to the touch. He tells me that he "really didn't want to put it down", and says of the possibility of acquiring the book in print form, "I would love to hold the book." This longing is felt rather than articulated. "To actually physically have it, would, you know, yeah," explains Mark, trailing off. Kennicott writes of his "first kiss" – a textual, rather than interpersonal encounter, between two schoolboys in Herman Hesse's novel *Beneath the Wheel* (1906) – that "reading that passage […] made the book feel intensely real, fusing Hesse's imaginary world with the physical object I was holding in my hands" (n. pag.). Angus Brown writes similarly of the moment in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star* (1994) when Edward, the

protagonist, imagines another character, Matt, sliding his hand suggestively up Edward's thigh. "By a fluke of typesetting", explains Brown, "this description of Matt's right hand falls at the foot of a recto page" in his personal copy of the novel (25). "As my fingers graze the cover", Brown continues, "Matt's moving hand momentarily corresponds to my own, and the touch of my reading brushes against Edward's fantasy" (25). It is in "movements like this", Brown suggests, that "the novel's plot, the material book, and the act of reading" come into "an oblique yet evocative dialogue" (25-6).

The understandable urge towards secrecy, to be, as Kate says, "guilty and furtive" about the consumption of books featuring (homo)sexual content, is reflected across other oral history accounts of queer reading, which again enact a kind of exchange or transfer from the book's textual to its material properties. Something of the unspoken, heady aftereffects of the conjunction of plot, page and personal response linger also in Alice's reading history. For Alice, struggling with gender nonconformity at an all-boys' boarding school during the 1960s, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) is one book among several that was "passed around smuttily" among the pupils: "[l]ike everything else", Alice explains, "I mean, the *James Bond*s are passed around smuttily as well". However, it is *Lolita* that for Alice carries a particularly explosive charge. "I think I was about fourteen reading this, in third form", Alice tells me. She is excited by it, identifies with Lolita, wants to *be* Lolita, and yet the book's frisson is generated at least as much by the book-as-object as by its content. "I don't think I even actually managed to finish the book, it was just too, too…" Alice confesses, of her adolescent encounters with the novel. "I almost find the pages hot to touch." Something of the same kind of nagging imperative of the material object is expressed by Brown, alerted to the "physicality of reading" Hollinghurst's fiction, as seen above, by its titillating subject matter: "As I read, I became more aware of the book in my hands, more sensitive to the feel of cover and page" (25). In a reversal of the dematerialisation of the page that the

reader experiences through their absorption into narrative, for Alice the surface friction of hands and fingers against paper and ink suffuses the reading experience, eventually subsuming the textual entirely in a haptic, sensory overload. Discussing the experience is clearly uncomfortable for Alice: "you really hit a goldmine there", she tells me, rapidly changing the subject. "I don't think I've ever said that before. Don't think I've ever admitted that." For such a linguistically playful, sensorily attuned and *embodying* novel – "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 3) – it is notable that for Alice, the sexual power of Nabokov's work is felt rather than spoken, resisting verbal articulation both privately (in reading), and publically, in our conversation. *Lolita* detonates something powerfully, inexpressibly and frighteningly queer, for Alice, saturated with shame, confusion and sexual excitement. "Touch gives the reassurance of contact," as Brown writes, "without a reliable codification of meaning […] we are not always in charge of our reading" (26). Transmitted from the narrative content to the physical form of the book, this is a charge carried by the material page; it remains hard for Alice to integrate, articulate or explain some fifty years later.

The symbolic displacement of reader by book is perhaps manifested most dramatically in Julia's account, where the struggle for control over the text's affective impact on its reader is played out instead through a struggle over the book-as-object. Reading Jilly Cooper – "*Riders*, particularly", Julia tells me – allows her to access a store of sexual content; descriptions of "things I didn't know how to do or had ever seen before." These are as graphic – quite literally; they are written; this is, as Julia points out, sex "in black and white" – and as sinful and forbidden as the images in any pornographic magazine. Julia describes how, as a teenager, soon after she has read another Jilly Cooper novel, this time *Octavia* (1977), a conversion service is held at her parents' fundamentalist Pentecostal church. "[T]here was a whole big blah blah blah about giving your life to Jesus and giving up sin", Julia explains, "and I threw the copy of

Octavia into the sea, with my packet of cigarettes. 'Cos those were bad things that I wasn't supposed to be doing." It is once again the book-as-object that bears the brunt of carrying and containing such dangerous, textually transmitted knowledge, as Julia spiritually cleanses herself by committing the book, rather than her own body, to the waves.

Many of my narrators' intimate relations with the material text are, however, most clearly illustrated in accounts of transgressive reading that explicitly connect textual and sexual bodies. Sexual material gives rise to a heightened awareness of physical properties and proximities – not only as enacted within the text, between characters, but also between the bodies of reader and book. Growing up with strict Pentecostal parents, Julia's reading material was severely censored. Magazines were largely prohibited. "My mother gave me a copy of the *Just Seventeen* annual when I was seventeen", Julia tells me. It is a faintly humorous, literal interpretation of the age of the implied readership of the magazine, unlikely to be age-appropriate for most seventeen-year-old girls, who might more realistically have been encountering such material three or four years earlier. "And," Julia continues, "she'd ripped out all the problem pages." Books, on the other hand, were generally "considered okay" by Julia's parents; they were "educative". As such, Julia tried reading DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928; 1960) "quite young, actually […] because I knew it was a bit naughty", and was allowed access to it. Borrowing her grandmother's copy – which she identifies visually as one of "the old Penguin Classics" – Julia recounts her engagement with the text in physical terms: "I struggled through it, and I struggled through it and through it". Her ascent on the text is unrewarded, however; she "got to page three hundred and whatever it is, twenty seven, and page three hundred and twenty eight to three hundred and fifty were missing. And my grandmother had ripped it out, the bit, that I had worked so hard to get to." "It was gone," Julia finishes, "I remember being really cheated by that."

Other reading experiences are more satisfactorily consummated. Kate describes a holiday reading experience abroad, aged eleven or twelve, during which she encountered "quite a large collection of Victorian porn […] in English". She admits to being a "guilty and furtive" reader of one particular volume, yet this manifests not so much in an account of readerly process or practice, but in her relation to the physical book itself: "I think I had it hidden under a pillow […] and I had to put it back in exactly the right place on the shelf so that no-one would know that I'd read it." Julia is similarly circumspect about her encounters with Shirley Conran's *Lace* (1982) and Jilly Cooper's *Riders* (1985). She recalls "sneaking *Lace* home from school, and putting *Riders* under the covers and not letting them [her parents] see that I'd got it". Through their reading practices, Kate and Julia, like Mancino, enact a "secret choreography of book and body", to use Brown's phrase (26). Hiding them under pillows and beneath blankets, my narrators are quite literally bedding these books. Lee Lynch similarly describes reading "alone, heart pounding from both lust and terror of discovery, poised to plunge the tainted tome into hiding" (43). Her alliterative, hyperbolic lexis – "poised to plunge", the "tainted tome" – mimics the lurid tone of the pulp she guiltily consumes. The sensational insinuations that the book itself is "tainted" and might need to go "into hiding" position the book-as-object as transgressing social codes as flagrantly as any character from such a novel – or any reader. In these accounts, both reader and book are at risk of being caught in a mutually compromising position.

Queer resonance and the noisy book

An unexpected result of *talking* about reading seems to be that situating the book within the social space of the oral history interview focuses attention on the object of the book as a material thing, as well as to its more intangible narrative and imaginative properties: what Steve McCaffery and bpNichol refer to as the "physical experience of print" as well as the "psychological and psychosemantic experience of operating verbal

signs" (59). In the examples discussed so far, I have focused on remembered experiences-with-books. I now examine the impact of books' presence in the interviews I carried out, with a focus on one case study in particular.

It has been part of the work of this first chapter to explain something of oral history's productively disruptive effect on more abstract theorising about books and reading. Capturing readers' recollections of reading within interviews re-presents for analysis those reading traces which cannot be recovered through other studies of reading in the past, such as the Reading Experience Database, which holds over 30,000 records of reading experiences of British people and of visitors to Britain between 1450 and 1945, or Matthew Grenby's work to reconstruct the child reader in the long eighteenth century. These draw on "data that lies outwith the printed texts themselves", in Grenby's phrase – marginalia, inscriptions, personal accounts, images, diaries, memoirs, court records, sociological surveys, and other documents – to recreate the reader and their experience through *texts* of various kinds (2). The insistent presence of narrator, interviewer, and in some cases, book, within the oral history interview helps to illuminate the complex reciprocities between books and bodies, as shown above.

But oral history itself is grappling with methodological questions about embodiment. Historically, oral history, too, has been implicated in a perhaps unexpectedly textual paradigm, even as concerns about the privileging or the "perils" of the transcript have been raised, most famously by Raphael Samuel (1971). As discussed in the methodology section of my Introduction, however, advances in digital technologies mean that in recent years, archives frequently consist of audio alongside interview *summaries*, with no transcripts at all. As such, audio has begun to be analysed in new ways. Recent historiographers of oral history, for example, have called for renewed attention to the voice as "a rich medium in its own right", in Anne Karpf's phrase, rather than a mere "retrieval mechanism" (51). The debate between the

'readability' of the transcript versus the accurate rendering of speech patterns, tone, inflection, emotion or gesture is well-rehearsed. Pitch, intonation, volume, laughter, pauses and rhythm can all convey crucial meaning. Irony and sarcasm leave no trace on the page, since they involve complex double meanings and a gap between utterance and tone of voice. Even through notation systems developed to capture some of these, to render the audio of an interview in a textual transcript can be, to borrow a term from information technology, a lossy process – lossy compression being a technique to reduce the size of an image file, for example, by approximating and partially discarding some of its data, in order that it might be more easily stored, handled and transmitted. Separating out the data "retriev[ed]" in the oral history interview – the audio track of the words spoken, or their textual transcription – from the voice as medium, raises questions, too, about what else might be captured through recorded sound; what else might be at risk of elision within traditional oral historical analysis. To process an oral history encounter through this kind of 'multitrack' framework seems to me analogous to being able to disentwine the process of reading or having read from a relation to the book as object. It is not only the voice that "re-sounds", to use Karpf's term, separately to that "raw material gathered through" its "conduit", but emotion, gaps and silences, the unspoken, the inferred, the gestural and bodily, and the intersubjective relationship between narrator and researcher (50-1). All are aspects of the interview which emerge throughout and (should) inform any subsequent parsing of the interview material. If the "distance between a transcript and the voice", as Francis Good puts it, "is usually well-appreciated" in oral history praxis, then the distance between a transcript and what Friedrich Kittler refers to as the "spectrum of noise" is necessarily even greater (Good 678; Kittler 23).

The case study I now want to explore is a (re)reading of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), which I read and my narrator Kate reread, for our second conversation. While bibliomemoirists such as Spufford revisit childhood favourites in

order to assess their influence on their child-selves – a "positive rather than a phobic theory of text-self formation", as Kenneth Kidd puts it – I wanted to remain alert to those less-than-positive feelings that I suspected might also be accessed in and associated with memories of books and reading ("The Child, the Scholar" 16). As such, I asked each narrator during my first interview with them whether there were particular books they remember that provoked strong feelings other than pleasure: whether they remember disliking any particular books, for example, or being bored by them. Of the various responses I received, only Kate went so far as to state that, as a result of her negative feelings towards a particular book from childhood, she would like to revisit the text in question:

> I remember I read Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*. Is that about an otter? God, what was I doing, I just read all these books about animals. And I couldn't get on with that at all. And I'd quite like to go back to it now and find out why. There was something about the style that I really, really didn't like.

Contrary to the usual selection process for texts to reread and discuss, in which books have tended to coalesce within what Catherine Stimpson terms the "paracanon", that personal organising structure made up of "beloved" books that readers might treasure, express gratitude towards, or even become addicted to, Kate's suggestion that we revisit something from her anti- or counter-paracanon produced an antagonistic relationship between reader and book from the outset (958). "Shall we move on to Gavin Maxwell?", I ask in our second interview after our discussion of Rumer Godden's *The Diddakoi* (1972) has concluded, to which Kate responds drily: "This is going to be a shorter conversation."

Ring of Bright Water is an account of Maxwell's solitary life at Camusfeàrna, his home looking out over the water towards the inner Hebrides, and the companionship he found there with a series of otters that he tamed and lived with. It is also a paean to the wilds of the west coast of Scotland. Lauded for the beauty and majesty of its nature writing, it sold more than a million copies, and was (heavily) adapted into a popular

feature film in 1969. Bracketed by Maxwell's biographer Douglas Botting alongside both Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* (1927) and praised by the New York Herald-Tribune as "'one of the outstanding wildlife books of all time'" (qtd. in Botting xvi), it straddles the canons of nature writing and writing if not *for*, at least, *given to* children, albeit uneasily. This generic disorientation is noted immediately by Kate. "This is not a children's book. What was I doing, reading this?", she asks. "It's got, like, Latin on the first page. […] And look at the size of the print." Nonetheless, its popularity was such that in 1962 Puffin Books brought out an abridged version, *The Otter's Tale*, maximising the parts of the narrative perhaps most appealing to a child audience. (As Kate says of the original, "the whole of the first book" – there are two volumes – "there's no otters in it at all".)

Maxwell – "poet, painter, shark-hunter, naturalist, traveller, secret agent and aristocratic opter-out", according to Botting – describes his life at Camusfeàrna, his occasional forays to London, and even Iraq, with an eccentric, entitled, faintly chaotic charisma (xxi). His is a charm that Kate remained peculiarly impervious to. For Kate, this book is "really, really dull", "strange", and "reactionary"; Maxwell is '"cagey", "mysterious", "you don't get any sense of him as a human being. Or of anyone else. Or of his relationships." Her response to *Ring of Bright Water* is one of "general bafflement"; she is "alternately intrigued and annoyed" by it, but recalls cheerfully that, as a child, this manifested only in "[b]oredom". It is in this initial one word answer to my question, "What did you feel when you were reading it?", that the intriguing gap between the verbal and the paraverbal first opens up. Karpf's call to attend to the voice-as-medium as well as message is useful here. As Karpf indicates, there is far more information imparted by speech than its purely semantic content, and the difference between listening to Kate's lightly humorous delivery and reading her brief two-syllable response in the transcript is just one of the cumulative small losses that occur in the mediation of oral history audio into text. This paraverbal element – Kate's tone of

voice – was my first indication that there was something going on under the surface of this interview.

What might be revealed in a moment of disjuncture such as this? *Ring of Bright Water* is, in Kate's adult analysis, a "very, sort of, static book" with "really lengthy descriptions of landscape and nature, which all kids love, of course". Kate surmises that as a child, "there must have been a lot of bits that I sort of dutifully ploughed through, or just skipped – and thought, where's the bit with the otter?" However, Kate actively *chose* to revisit *Ring of Bright Water*, and though she "wanted very badly to give up" this second reading, completed the task of rereading it. Despite her stated feeling towards the text in question, does something in Kate's tone belie a kind of pleasure in, or fascination with it? What is the chirpy levity of her reply – "[b]oredom" – masking? Is there here a nagging sense of a reading experience that has remained somehow unresolved? Rather than being a reason to pass over a reading memory, to change my line of questioning or to terminate the interview early, boredom as an affective response opened an unexpected potential avenue for further investigation in this interview; one which, it transpired, would be peculiarly fruitful. Julian Jason Haladyn and Michael E. Gardiner query whether "being bored" could function as "as moment of potential" (3). Invoking Benjamin, they ask whether boredom as an affective response marks, to use Benjamin's term, a "*threshold*", an inciting moment "when meaning can and must be created" (3). For Benjamin, as Haladyn and Gardiner go on to discuss, boredom is equated not with dullness, banality, depression, melancholia or *ennui*, but with mental relaxation. It is a kind of dream-state out of which might emerge "something special, a possibility that can only be realised by an individual's desire to see more than is given" (11). In Benjamin's own phrase, boredom is "always the external surface of unconscious events" (qtd. in Haladyn and Gardiner 11).

Indeed, a subtextual, concealed or parallel narrative emerges throughout the interview. "[T]here were things", Kate tells me of her adult rereading of *Ring of Bright*

Water, "that I picked up this time". Interrogating her own response, Kate reads *Ring of Bright Water* against itself, alert to such incongruities, and alert, also, to the "omissions" in the book – "the massive gap. The big hole in the centre of this" – which, as an adult, she identifies as "sex and relationships". Maxwell, Kate surmises, is rich, posh, affected, and hiding something. It is at this point that the interview takes an unforeseen turn. "I really wanted him to be gay, I thought, you must be gay", she tells me. "But he's not". During the interview I co-construct a reading of *Ring of Bright Water* with Kate that recentres Maxwell's alleged homosexuality. I discuss in detail Kate's engagement with the book's textual content in the final section of Chapter Three, on queer reading strategies. In this section, however, I focus on those 'readings' that are made through non-textual means: through photographs, tone of voice, the unspoken, the intersubjective, the bodily, and with, and by, the material object of the book.

The surface narrative of *Ring of Bright Water* is disrupted, for Kate, by her perception of its oddly concealing qualities. The book's material properties strengthen this impression: the images included within it, for example, are another kind of presence that interrupt the text in a manner Kate finds both confusing and amusing. She is annoyed that "they have different photos in different editions, 'cos it suggests that the pictures aren't part of the book", and frustrated "that I can't see if [the photos are] the same ones, or which ones they were that I'd seen as a child". She comments that "the photos seem to tell a slightly different story to the text, or at least they fill in some of the gaps". Specifically, "there's a picture of some woman that the otter is really fond of, but we don't know whether Gavin Maxwell is fond of her" (see fig. 2). This is Kathleen Raine, from whose poem "The Marriage of Psyche" (1952) the book takes both its title and epigraph – although it is unattributed. The "mentions of female companions and women hanging their stockings up, and stuff" – Kate says "I can't remember if that's an actual bit" – is an image, too, again an ambiguous one (see fig. 3). There is her favourite image, of a naked boy on waterfall (see fig. 4). And "then there's

this, although we can only speculate, this boy called Jimmy Watt, who turns up to mind the otters but we don't know anything about him" (see fig. 5). "The photographs", Kate tells me, "are more revealing than the narrative".

It is also in the unexpressed and unexpanded upon that Kate locates her suspicion about the book's subtext. Maxwell's overstated masculinity and assumed heterosexuality "really doesn't ring true", for Kate, "because there's a picture of him in a kilt" (see fig. 6). What could be read as a conventional marker of Scottish identity, for Kate hints at queer possibility. "I mean, not that kilts are in themselves gay, but he just looks, like, I don't know", she says. "There's something", she continues. "There is something." It's a story that is hard to read, even in the transcript – undoubtedly there *is* something subtextual going on in Maxwell's memoir, but it's hard to pin down with any certainty. It also relies largely on the intersubjectivity between narrator and interviewer – it remained unarticulated, beyond this, even in our interview. Maxwell, Kate comments, "lets slip", "you hear things in the background", "you think, oh". This 'oh', in particular, is suggestive, wondering, and speculative – it contains inferences not transmitted by its rendering into textual transcript. When I ask Kate to expand on why she thought he 'must be gay', she picks out the following examples from both photographs and narrative. "There's the gay – sorry, there's not the gay, there's the naked boy on a waterfall," she tells me, followed shortly by her comment that "[t]here's these sections where he's desperately, desperately trying to convince us that he's really having this very healthy hom-, heterosexual sex life." But here her two readings of the book – reading it at face value, and reading it for its queer subtext – clash, in productive slippages she makes while talking. These slips are another kind of presence, this time unconscious on the part of the speaker. It is also in the background of the oral history interview itself, therefore, that the 'real' story emerges. In the silences and stumblings of the oral account, and the gaps that both narrator and interviewer fill – in mutual, though not necessarily verbally expressed, understanding during the course of the

Fig. 2. Kathleen Raine, pictured with Mijbil the otter. Photograph reproduced in Gavin Maxwell, *The Ring of Bright Water Trilogy*, edited by Austin Chinn (Penguin, 2001), Section 1, p. 4.

Fig. 3. Gavin Maxwell's hearth at Camusfeàrna. Photograph reproduced in Gavin Maxwell, *The Ring of Bright Water Trilogy*, edited by Austin Chinn (Penguin, 2001), Section 1, p. 2.

Fig 4. Jimmy Watt at a waterfall. Photograph reproduced in Gavin Maxwell, *The Ring of Bright Water Trilogy*, edited by Austin Chinn (Penguin, 2001), Section 1, p. 3.

Fig. 5. Jimmy Watt, pictured with Edal the otter. Photograph reproduced in Gavin Maxwell, *The Ring of Bright Water Trilogy*, edited by Austin Chinn (Penguin, 2001), Section 1, p. 8.

Fig. 6. Gavin Maxwell in the doorway at Camusfeàrna. Photograph reproduced in Gavin Maxwell, *The Ring of Bright Water Trilogy*, edited by Austin Chinn (Penguin, 2001), Section 1, p. 2.

interview – this reading of *Ring of Bright Water*'s hidden gay history is made tangible, 'real', and palpable. Through the interview process and its subsequent analysis, there is a righting (or re-writing) of what Kate refers to as the "level of wrongness in this book".

This case study, one of evasion, elision, omission, is also one of unexpected emergence and presence. Listening back to the audio, I was surprised to find that Kate and I were actually in conversation with – in fact, were being constantly interrupted by – a third participant, a particularly noisy entity I hadn't been paying attention to at the time. Often my questioning is punctuated with the sound of pages being rifled through. I turn now to the untranscribable – those noises and gestures captured by the audio, which themselves carry meaning, but which are elided in a written transcription of the interview experience.

Michel de Certeau alerts us to those aspects of reading that often go unnoticed, the "subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises", "in short", he says, "a wild orchestration of the body" (160). From the outset of our conversation about *Ring of Bright Water*, such 'gestures' and 'rustlings' are a kind of interference in the interview. It is not always possible to distinguish, on the audio, the source of such noises. Here is a partial, estimated inventory. As we agree that our conversation about Gavin Maxwell will be shorter than our previous conversation, concerning Rumer Godden's *The Diddakoi*, Kate sighs and shifts in her chair; she mentions *Ring of Bright Water* as a book that she "didn't enjoy", and the audible incursions here sound distinctly papery. It is "not a children's book", it has Latin in it, "in no way is this enjoyable for a child": these observations are accompanied by the whisper of pages being rifled through. "I definitely remember the otter", Kate says: a quick flick registers on the audio. She returns again to her uncertainty about its implied audience, asking "is it a kids' book? I don't even know", and again, there is an audible flurry of pages and cover, which continues as I discuss its generic instability, and its potential twinning with Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* in the public imagination. There

are some muffled thumps here, and Kate moves closer to the microphone. “Lengthy descriptions of landscape” prompt more flicking through of pages, which separates into the distinct sound of a single page being turned, once, then twice, as Kate reflects on “kittens being killed, and animals being shredded”.

Sometimes, of course, these moments of interference are merely the practical corollary of book-use; as for example, when Kate puts the book down in order to interrupt the interview for a toilet break, when she locates a particular passage to read aloud to me, or when, tapping twice on the book’s cover, she refers to “this version”. Towards the end of the interview, I detail some of Kate’s alleged affective responses to the book: boredom, frustration, bafflement. Asking whether her expectations were met, in rereading, page-flip gives way to the slap of the closed book on the table, as Kate responds that they were “met, completely. Well done, Gavin.” Sometimes, however, the tactile relationship between Kate and the book seems less consciously directed. Kate muses on what she “hadn’t remembered” from childhood, admitting to having “maybe [...] skipped” parts in search of “the bit with the otter”. The audio registers a corresponding skipping through of pages from cover to cover; the thicker card of the front and back cover snaps crisply while she is talking, before and after the soft brushing of the inner pages. It appears, listening back to the interview, as if the book is more of an active participant than one might expect; this is, in fact, a dialogue not only with a narrator, but also with a book. The mention of things that Kate “picked up” provokes a papery response; her comment that the book has something “really reactionary” about it is followed by what sounds like a repeated stroking of its cover; almost a kind of placating. Kate’s verbally expressed desire for Maxwell’s homosexuality to be made more overt and explicit in the text is emphasised by an insistent ruffling of pages. When I ask at the end of the interview, ‘Is there anything else you’d like to say about *Ring of Bright Water*?’ the book itself answers, in this way, as I

am speaking. The book itself seems to 'speak out' in support of the reading co-created by Kate and myself during the interview.

To frame this, I would like to use the work of media theorist Kittler. "[O]ral history today", writes Kittler, "confronts the historian's writing monopoly" (6). For Kittler, the "grooves of records store ghastly waste, the real of bodies"; they capture that which cannot be encoded in written form (154). It is the process of recording the interview and the subsequent technologies of storage, in the formats of audio and/or transcript, that allow us to capture and analyse a version of de Certeau's "wild orchestration", including, even privileging, Kittler's "ghastly waste". An oral history of reading, then, makes continual connections between intangible cultural heritage – memories of reading – and tangible heritage: the physical experiences-with-books that are recollected and replayed during the interview. Material and immaterial texts are brought once more into conjunction, and, as Cathy Burnett notes, are "always enmeshed with each other" (834). Rifling and flicking through pages to locate a particular sentence, the slap of the closed book on the table in frustration or disgust, these gestural, embodied relations to the text counterpoint Kate's intangible recalled responses; the aurality of the interview recording foregrounds the materiality of the book. In one sense, this interview is about reading – about a reader's relationship with the *content* of the book – but in another sense there is an unfolding relationship captured in the audio between reader and book which augments our understanding of what reading is, and the complexities of our relationships with the book as object. Kate's reading experience is one in which information, of a kind, is transmitted between page and reader haptically and aurally, as well as visually. It is a dialogue about and with a book, and a series of bodily interventions that Kate herself may well have been unaware of during her conversation with me.

There are, in this interview, concomitant narratives produced by the affective response to the book, the silences and gaps in conversation, wordless gestures, the

intersubjective – and often unspoken – relation between narrator and interviewer, and the insistent, audible incursions of the material text itself. Listening carefully to an interview in all its richness – including those interventions made by the noisy bodies of narrator, interviewer, and book – provides alternative answers to the vexed question of, as Alison Hennegan puts it, "how it is and what it is that we 'read'", which move beyond the hermeneutic, textual and cerebral to consider the material, vocal and bodily (166). Analysing the interactions between narrator, interviewer and book within the situated, time-bound oral history interview, I argue, offers new insights into not only the strangeness and complexity of reading as a process and a practice, but also that of books-as-objects, and of the 'everyday' reader's encounters with, and investments in them.

Conclusion

"What queer disease is this that comes over you every day, of holding things and staring at them for hours together, paralyzed of motion and vacant of all conscious life?" (qtd. in Price, "Reading" 303). So asks William James, in the persona of a dog who might observe, with some confusion, the practice of reading from the outside. In this opening chapter, I have tried to show how oral histories of reading have enabled me to tease apart my narrators' memories of books, and memories of reading as two discrete areas for analysis. I have focused on the thingness of the book and the materiality of reading; the value of "holding things and staring at them for hours together". I have suggested, through close readings of my own interviews, that oral history can mediate productively between traditional literary criticism and book history. Within oral histories of reading, I suggest, exist parallel histories of the book; my narrators prompt through their recollections a consideration of some of the several uses to which readers put books, aside from or instead of reading them. For my narrators, the book exists also as object, as technology, as symbol, and as textual and extratextual

container. Karin Littau suggests that literary theory positions the reader either as an "isolated solitary figure", or as a "hypothetical entity theorized on the basis of the theorist's own reading strategies" (128). Instead, she calls for this reader to be embodied, "historicized and gendered", "racialized, sexualized, technologized" (157). This chapter has gone some way to embodying the reader (and the book, as in the example of *Ring of Bright Water*), materially, socially, affectively and sexually. Fundamentally, the meanings that books make, as (im)material texts, are richer and more strange than is often acknowledged; oral history, I suggest, provides a valuable entry point into exploring the multiple significations of the book further. In what follows, I move from a focus on the (often) tacit knowledge communicated by haptic experiences-with-books to considering my narrators' engagements with the spaces and places of book culture, and the ways in which books and reading orient LGBTQ readers and create space for them.

Chapter Two
"A space where I could be me": The queer space of reading

Sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s, a young man named Tony Openshaw entered his local library in Salford, near Manchester, in search of a specific book – one that had become no less than "an obsession". Coming across it first as a television adaptation, and finding that its protagonist provoked in him a bewildering array of "really strange feelings", Tony located the title in question in the library catalogue: Quentin Crisp's 1968 autobiography, *The Naked Civil Servant*. Tony soon realised, however, that of all those available to the borrowing public, this particular volume would be "impossible to get out of the library". Sequestered "on the reserve stock list", it was accessible only with the co-operation of an obliging librarian: crucially, before Tony could lay his hands on the book, he "would have to ask for it". Convinced that "she would *know* I was gay if I got this book out of the reserve stock", and not yet confident in or open about his identity as a gay man, for Tony this proposition was, quite literally, unspeakable. However, such was his desire to read Crisp, Tony explains, that he "pluck[ed] up the courage" and "wrote a little note to the librarian, saying 'Quentin Crisp, *Naked Civil Servant'* and passed her the note", in silence, across the desk. These efforts were repaid. On reading Crisp's memoir, Tony recalls fervently his "real feelings" that "this is, like, the most, a really important book". "I just loved it", he continues. Crisp's was a book so encompassing and, at some level, so *familiar* that it provoked in Tony a core sense of security and self-acceptance: "I mean", he says, "it was just like, I'm home".

Reader to catalogue to librarian to "little note" to reserve stock to book to reader: it is almost possible to visualise the relations between Tony and *The Naked Civil Servant* in his account, dotted lines busily criss-crossing the library space to create a complex web of connection involving several key actors – of which the book is only one. Plotting a narrative of an experience-with-books in this way provides a picture of

the way reading "spreads out in and defines" space, as Christina Lupton puts it; or, perhaps more precisely, how *books* do, as the book signifies strongly in Tony's account, even before it is read (16). Thinking about reading and book-use in this way – as behaviours and practices which exist *in* space, embedded firmly in the social – is useful, given some critical accounts which seek to downplay these aspects in favour of more metaphysical constructions of *where* reading takes place (of which more later). Moreover, encounters such as the ones Tony reflects on here come, after a time, to seem well-trodden ground to a researcher fascinated by queer readers and queer reading. Anecdotal LGBTQ reading histories and memories reported by various writers and critics, as well as the specific oral historical accounts gathered during this research, traverse similar themes: the navigation of the bookshop or library space and the movement of books within that space; the connections and community to be found between book, author and reader; and the very personal, affective and situated response to the works encountered. The previous chapter examines the material (and immaterial) properties of the book. It foregrounds the somatic and haptic aspects of reading and experiences-with-books, examining the interplay between the body of the reader and of the book in my narrators' memories and reading histories, and in the interview encounter.

In this chapter, I extend this focus on materiality to further consider reading's spatial and social aspects. What are the various spaces of reading – private, metaphorical, material, public? How does encountering a book in a particular space – in Tony's case, the space of the library – shape LGBTQ readers' responses to it, and the meanings it makes? What can we learn from LGBTQ readers' extratextual engagements with a book – their need to *ask* for a particular book, in order to retrieve it from a particular location, or to write "a little note"? And what of the spatial equivalences between reader and book? Tony reflects that to take Crisp's memoir out of the library felt tantamount to coming out *to* the librarian: "she would *know* I was gay". Amy talked

of *A Village Affair* as existing within the "archive of me"; for Tony, reading Crisp's memoir provoked a feeling of belonging, of coming "home". As well as, and through explorations of their movements in physical space, this chapter investigates also the ways in which books and reading can create necessary discursive space for my narrators to construct, practise and enact their LGBTQ identities.

I begin with a discussion of the current theoretical interest in ideas of the spatial as applied both to the histories of sexuality and of reading. Moving on to trace the private spaces of reading recalled by my narrators, both metaphorical and physical, I argue that talking about books facilitates a mapping of these various hard-to-separate (and, often, hard fully to envision) readerly environments. Moreover, it shows their simultaneity; how they interconnect and overlap, disrupting a narrative of total readerly 'dematerialisation', or immersion, to bring attention back repeatedly to *actual* material sites and to corresponding, *real* landscapes. Through memories of reading recalled by a number of my narrators, I show how the abstract 'space' opened up by certain key reading experiences directly affects the LGBTQ reader's positioning within and navigation of the physical world. The final section of this chapter is concerned with the more public spaces of book culture – the library and the bookshop. Here, I explore the role of these reading spaces in the acquisition or suppression of knowledge or information relating to LGBTQ lives, and in the formation of queer subjectivities and self-narratives. LGBTQ reading histories and memories are often recounted as if each reader's experience occurred in isolation, without precedent or example; the result of solitary expeditions through the stacks, shelves, or rotating stands. Paradoxically, accounts of reading – or experiences-with-books – in public often reinforce the specificity and privacy of such encounters. In these shared, and yet peculiarly private, aspects of the LGBTQ reading experience, the overlaying of metaphorical and actual, private and public space again plays out. Developing from the previous chapter my proposal that oral histories of books and reading reveal the strange, dual properties of

the book – its (im)materiality – I suggest in what follows that *talking* about reading and experiences-with-books shows how books work to create, close off, charge, change and queer space for LGBTQ readers.

Theorising space for LGBTQ readers

"I found my subjectivity by reading", declares Julia, "absolutely I did". Brought up in "a small community" in Wales "by two evangelical Pentecostals", Julia's childhood was, she tells me, "strange". With her two siblings – Julia, the eldest of three, has a younger sister and brother – she had "a very restrictive upbringing", in which her parents "policed what I watched on television", "policed magazines that I read", and confiscated her cassettes. "Somebody gave me a Paul Young tape […] And it had a song on it called 'Sex,'" Julia recalls. "And my dad came up to my room and he took it away and said I wasn't allowed to have it […] I didn't even like him [Paul Young]". Julia employs a spatial register from the beginning of our conversation, to expand on both the practical, physical constraints on her liberty during these formative years, and more metaphorically, to relate her *felt* experience of what she remembers as "quite a claustrophobic family environment", a "bubble of indoctrinated thinking". As a family, they were "very church-oriented". Escaping the sanctioned, disciplined orbits of home, church and school was not easy; she "wasn't allowed to go and hang out" with her peers. "I didn't really have many friends", Julia tells me. As a consequence, she describes feeling as if there was "this invisible boundary between me and everybody else". "I always think of it", she explains, "as being kept in a snow-globe". Literacy, therefore, provided a crucial channel between this severely boundaried and controlled microclimate, surveilled and "policed" by her parents and extended family, and the wider context of 1970s and 1980s Britain. Julia recalls at the age of six, "reading a *Secret Seven* book in the back of the car, and just eating it up; suddenly I could read, independently". Metaphorically taking the body of the book into her own here goes

beyond a metaphor of reading-as-eating (as discussed in Chapter One) to say something about the ability of the interaction with the written word to enlarge and expand the space available to Julia throughout her childhood and adolescence, in her interior, personal life as well as her social and public one. She describes this available space as "mental freedom". Reading bestowed independence; it became a "lifeline" and a "sort of escape route". As Julia remarks of her early reading experiences, "I found a space where I could be me". Implicit in our conversation is the idea that to be herself is also to be her *lesbian* self.

Julia's memories of reading and experiences-with-books are clotted with several involved concepts that I would like to separate in what follows. How do experiences-with-books and reading help to open up this vital interior space for Julia, and in so doing, help her to negotiate both physical and abstract spaces; the boundaries between inside and outside the family, the allowed and the denied, between indoctrination and "mental freedom" or "me and everybody else"? As Sally Munt writes, identity is "contextual and temporal and subject to social forces" (162). But there is something about books and reading which allows Julia – and other of my narrators – to create a resistant subjectivity, a defiant 'me' in the middle of such a massing of externalities, to bring something of the outside, as it were, *in* – (inside the bubble, inside the snow-globe) – and to remake it for her own ends. This then affects Julia's ability to navigate and to position herself in the world 'outside' the book. To begin, I want to outline some recent discussions of space in LGBTQ historiography and in work on the history of reading.

"[S]pace", writes Munt, "is central to theorizing about identity" (163). Identities, she argues, are "produced, expressed and authenticated by and through space" (174). Spatiality and the material environment have, from the mid-1990s onwards, become increasingly important to social and cultural theorists interested in questions of identity and sexuality, and in how LGBTQ identities are forged, performed, put into

dialogue with others, surveilled or regulated. As Rebecca Jennings usefully puts it, "[i]dentities are invested with meaning and deployed in the material world", and therefore, environment inevitably shapes their construction and performance (5). In histories of sexuality, as Jennings identifies, a certain scholarly hierarchy first tended to privilege the male, gay and public uses of space – the bar and the street – as prime sites for investigation (6). Lesbians' spatial practices, until relatively recently, have received less academic attention. They have often been analysed in terms of "private friendship networks" or positioned as "marginal", as a result of what sociologists and feminist cultural geographers such as Gill Valentine read as the gendered and heterosexist construction of public space (Jennings 5-6). Increasingly, however, theorists from various disciplines have charted gay *and* lesbian spatial practices, both public and private. Jennings's 2007 study investigates the "material world of post-war Britain" for lesbians, including the public spaces of school, work, the bar and the club – as well as the domestic sphere of relationships and the home (6). Jane Traies, in her doctoral work, examines the women's Armed Forces as a "space[...] of liberation" for women in the 1950s, '60s and '70s (148-56). In a significant shift away from previous work on the spaces of queer masculinity, Matt Cook's 2014 study *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth Century London* explores the homes and home-making of queer *men* in London. In what follows, I position spaces of reading, both private and public, as still relatively unmapped sites of LGBTQ spatiality. I suggest that attention to LGBTQ spaces of reading can usefully contribute to work on uses of queer public space *and* domestic or private space; to an expanded understanding of the experiences it is possible to have within these spaces, and of the practices they enable.

In relation to queer bodies and practices, these physical and pragmatic uses of space continually map on to, and are overlaid by, more metaphorical and abstract conceptualisations. Being 'out', in the sense of participating in a public sphere, *moving through space,* and being 'out' in the sense of being visible and *taking up space* as an

LGBTQ person; both inform queer ontological possibilities, what Munt refers to as "narratives of becoming, […] tactics of presence, of spatial occupation" (4). "For a lesbian to 'be'", Munt argues, "is still an insurgent statement and enactment of desire, a radical emplacement in a culture of effacement" (4). Twenty years on, the category 'lesbian' may appear less contested than that of 'trans', say, but the spatial is still foregrounded in queer discursive practices: being 'visible', 'coming out' – of the closet, or out *into* queer community; shared references to 'outsiderliness' or of being the 'odd one out'. These rhetorical devices have real-world corollaries, as LGBTQ spaces of various kinds and the issue of where and how LGBTQ bodies can be seen, recognised and kept safe continue to come under threat. According to Human Rights Watch, for example, in 2019 "at least 68 countries still have national laws criminalizing same-sex relations between consenting adults. In addition, at least nine countries have national laws criminalizing forms of gender expression that target transgender and gender nonconforming people" (n. pag.). The space that it might be possible to open up or claim as an LGBTQ individual – self-identified, inner, private – is necessarily contoured through the placement of the individual *in the world*: through proximity with other bodies, others' perceptions or prejudices, and in public encounters, from the supportive, to the desiring, to the hostile. Munt, writing in 1998, notes that "[m]uch…theoretical work" in lesbian and gay studies, following Michel Foucault's interventions on the relations between space and power, "has been generated by those for whom concerns about space are ultimately concerned with *making some*" (163) (my emphasis).

Space, to borrow Munt's phrase, is also becoming increasingly central to theorising about reading. Running in parallel, some similar issues to those outlined above have been circulating within the history of reading over the last thirty years. In *The Order of Books* (1992), Roger Chartier insists on the spatial and social as key areas for historians of reading; reading "is a material act", which, Chartier argues, "is

inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself and others" (8). In her 1993 monograph *The Woman Reader*, Kate Flint situates the Victorian and Edwardian woman reader in her socio-historical context, examining reading as a private, social and public practice. The "study of reading", she writes, "involves examining a fulcrum: the meeting-place of discourses of subjectivity and socialization" (43). Steven Colclough notes Flint's revisiting of this work some thirteen years later, to investigate not only the relationship between reader and text – its "'contents, […] rhetoric and […] conventions'" – but between reader, text and the context of reading (qtd. in Colclough 99). Flint recognises that subjects are constructed not only through *what* they read, but *where* and *how* they encounter their reading matter, and that readers put texts to diverse uses accordingly; that, for example, to read in a social setting such as a public library is not an equivalent act to reading alone in the privacy of one's bedroom; it signals and signifies differently (104). Developing this previous work, Colclough asserts that it is "of paramount importance that historians of reading begin to map these spaces" in which reading takes place (99). Within them, he argues, in what is shared "between auditor and listener, or solitary reader and venue", are produced those "meanings that are impossible to recover from the text itself"; "reading environments", then, are "integral to the creation of meaning" (112). More recent scholarship within histories of reading has turned its attention away from textual "meaning" towards the places and spaces of print culture as "distinctive material sites", as Lucy Delap puts it, in and of themselves (172). Of the women's liberation movement in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Delap comments that the "centrality of books and other texts within feminism was shaped by the settings in which books were encountered" (171). Attention to these settings – libraries, schools, bookshops, drugstores, newsagents – as key sites of cultural transmission for LGBTQ readers brings home the ways in which the reading experience is not only, or sometimes not even, about the *read* book, but about its circulation among readers, its movements

through space, and the ways a book can charge and change that space. This can occur on an intensely private level: the experience of an individual reader who may have never previously articulated the importance of a book or the setting in which it is encountered, even to themselves. Additionally, a book can collapse and compress space, catalysing connection and community-building among readers who may be geographically or even temporally distant from each other.

I set out above the ways in which a consideration of queer bodies in space is also a consideration of the continual oscillation between the physical and pragmatic, and the more metaphorical and abstract. Something similar could be said of theorising the space of reading. While *where* reading takes place in material terms has increasingly come under scrutiny, the 'where' of reading produces another, more abstract discourse in which, nested within reading interiors such as the bedroom or bookshop exist other kinds of readerly interiority, bounded by the interplay between the reading experience and the 'inner world' of the reader's mind. Mary Jacobus usefully invokes D. W. Winnicott's concept of the "'continuity-contiguity'" moment found "not only in play [...] but in cultural experience", which for Winnicott is "neither the space of inner psychic life nor the space of lived experience", but an "intermediate area" between the two (5). Reading opens or unfolds space both outwards and inwards, and is, as Jacobus puts it, a "plunge into observation, self-observation, and memory [...] a plunge into something both known and not-known" (11-12). It is this area, a "'potential' space between the individual and the environment" which reading as a process opens up, and which I trace in my narrators' reading memories and histories (5). This aspect of the metaphorical 'space of reading' is particularly important to a discussion of selfhood. As Jacobus argues, many of our "implicit assumptions" about reading – the way we conceive of reading as a process which allows for the traversing of boundaries between inner and outer, self and other – also "provide the foundation for much of our thinking about subjectivity" (9). Reading

contributes to the creation of the ontological space referred to in the title of this chapter, and which I discuss in more detail above: Julia's reflection that, in reading, "I found a space where I could be me". The various kinds of readerly identification or disidentification that might occur in the process of reading, the ways in which, as Julia puts it, various characters "sewn together, would probably represent pretty much […] well, a lot of my internal world, there's an identification with them", will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

If, as this chapter goes on to demonstrate, libraries, bookshops and other, more private spaces of reading are important sites of investigation for the construction of queer selfhood, then the book is another kind of 'body' that shapes and facilitates this space-making for LGBTQ readers. As well as extending work on LGBTQ public and private space through analyses of my narrators' experiences of physical sites of reading, this chapter develops work on the cultural and intellectual discursive space available for LGBTQ individuals – its creation, their orientation within it, and the consequences for their subsequent navigation of physical space. In this, I am guided by Jennings's and Amy Tooth Murphy's work on the lesbian magazine *Arena Three*, which is a "forum", as Jennings puts it, for women "to present their own understandings of homosexuality" (13). A *forum* is precisely another kind of space for the construction of identity – Murphy goes so far as to state that Jennings positions the magazine as "a major lesbian social and cultural space" in its own right (50). My engagement is not with the magazine itself, but with this way of conceptualising textual engagement as a kind of spatial engagement, with consequences for readers' negotiations of their actual, material environments. I am also guided by Murphy's work on her narrators' engagements with lesbian literature, in which this kind of permeability and reciprocity between imaginative and actual worlds play out on several occasions. Lastly, my approach is informed by Traies's conclusions in her own doctoral work, that the two primary discursive spaces in which her narrators' lesbian identities were forged

involved entering new physical and geographical space – the world of the women's Armed Forces – and new cultural and intellectual space, the political space of second wave feminism. These examples have proved helpful in structuring the argument I make here – that reading and experiences-with-books occur within material environments which inflect and inform the construction of identity, a*nd which deserve analysis in their own right*; but that they also create metaphorical, discursive space for identity construction. An analysis of the queer space of reading is one which must take into account its private and public, figurative and literal aspects.

The private spaces of reading; or, where do we go when we read?

In the previous chapter, I discuss my narrators' propensity, like many other readers, to describe their reading child-selves in terms of the processes and practices of their reading – voracious, absorbed, insatiable, indiscriminate – but show too how the *object* of the book emerges insistently within their narratives of reading and experiences-with-books, as a thing worthy of attention. I show that, contrary to conventions of book-use which have encouraged "readers to efface their own bodies", as Leah Price puts it in her 2006 survey of the history of reading, and contrary, also, to certain prevalent ideas about the irrelevance or unhelpfulness of haptic, sensory responses to reading, my narrators' embodied, tactile responses to books feature strongly in their reading histories and memories, and have much to reveal about the interrelation between their (queer) bodies and books (309). Developing this, I now want to suggest that attention to my narrators' reading histories and memories allows for another kind of emergence: imbricated with the more metaphorical uses of space that books also facilitate for LGBTQ readers are recollections of physical environments, from the private and domestic to the external landscapes of countryside and village, which recur throughout these oral histories. As Alison Waller signals in *Remembering Childhood Books* (2019), "remembering readers may recall occasions of reading, not purely

because of the life-changing properties of the book or reading experience, but because of the physical and geographical spaces – 'actual space' or 'geospace' – in which these were embedded" (62).

These embedded spaces of reading are not always given due consideration, with some critical accounts of the reading experience tending to focus more on, as Sven Birkerts puts it, the "transition from the world we live in to the world of the book" (81). Here is Birkerts describing a broadly universalised reading process:

> What happens is a gradual immersion, an exchange in which we hand over our groundedness in the here and now in order to take up our new groundedness in the elsewhere of the book. The more fully we can accomplish this, the more truly we can be said to be reading. The tree in front of us must dim so that the tree on the page can take on an outline and a presence [...] The conversion is automatic, as unconscious as highway driving. (81)

"For Birkerts", writes Jacobus, "the experience of reading remains ultimately indescribable and immanent, while the materiality of the book all but disappears" (8). There is a propensity, too, to discuss reading as a strangely dematerialising process not only for the book, but for the reader, wherein the reader metaphorically vanishes into the text. "We project ourselves at the word and pass through it as through a turnstile", Birkerts continues; "we do this often, with astonishing facility" (81). Childhood reading especially is often recalled in these terms; nostalgically, as an escapist fleeing from the small disappointments, larger unhappinesses or plain grind of the quotidian, or simply as a means of accessing an alternative space of imaginative freedom and play. "Like many others who turned into writers," admits Rebecca Solnit in her essay "Flight", "I disappeared into books when I was very young, disappeared into them like someone running into the woods" (60). Francis Spufford depicts in his bibliomemoir *The Child that Books Built* (2002) the painstaking process of deciphering the "thicket of symbols" on the opening page of JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), until the black marks on the page appear to soften and thin, to "liquefy" (64-5). This dissolving of ink and paper occurs in tandem with that of Spufford's own body: he becomes "about as absent as a

present person could be" as narrative takes over (1). "Reading catatonically", Spufford reports, "I'd be gone" (2).

This is a compelling narrative for all kinds of readers, not only for those aiming to describe or recall reading, as Birkerts, Solnit and Spufford are, but also for critics engaging with children's reading practices. For Maria Tatar, for example, adults read with a "bifocal vision", able to position themselves both inside and outside the story, and to 'ground' or 'orient' themselves through critical thinking (4). The child reader, in contrast, reading with a "cultural innocence that was once our own", is monofocal, "absorbed", "totally lost" (4). Judith Armstrong, who has explored adult rereadings of children's literature, also upholds this duality between child and adult; according to Armstrong, the way we read as children is "wholehearted, overwhelming, all-absorbing, unquestioning" (254). Partly, I suggest, such formulations of the 'space' of reading have been shaped and brought forth by what Price labels the "Enlightenment ideal of linguistic and bibliographic transparency" (11). From the eighteenth century onwards, Price argues, the book is increasingly "imagined as a purely instrumental vehicle for ideas"; something the reader might look through, like a window pane, or even enter, like a doorway, finding themselves transported, in reading, to an imaginative other realm (11). But there is a kind of metaphysical fuzziness about these arguments that make gaining purchase on the issues I want to tackle here particularly tricky. Birkerts conflates reading with novel-reading – which is only one kind of reading with its own generic conventions – flattening and reducing 'readers' to a homogenous group: "we", "our", and "us". Tatar and Armstrong similarly group 'adults' and 'children' together, assuming shared reading practices defined by age. Most obviously, however, each of these critics ignore the material circumstances of reading which emerge persistently within accounts of encounters with books, including, but not limited to, the readerly engagements that take place in childhood and adolescence.

Mindful of the colloquial uses of spatial metaphor in discussions of reading – we talk of 'losing' ourselves in a book, as Alice does, and also of 'finding' ourselves – I was alert to any mention of these phrases during my first conversations with my narrators, sometimes probing more deeply around the issue of whether they recalled their experiences in such terms, if they had not already discussed them. This kind of reading-as-escapism *is* reported by my narrators. "I had my own world", explains Jo. "Books were that world. Plays were that world". Reading was, for Jo, "such an amazing escape". Amy tells me that, "I've always read in my own world." Of all my narrators, Alice cleaved most to the idea of, as she put it, getting "lost in a silly book". "You want to read", she tells me, recalling her unhappy years at a strict boys' boarding school, "because there's no other way out of this place". Reading is, Alice explains, "this weird idea that someone can take you away […] into this fantasy land". Alice uses reading "space age comics" to fuel recurrent fantasies that "as a very young person I'd go into space and become a girl, and nobody's there, so nobody can see me, nobody knows about it". Later, discussing her current self-conception of her gender identity, she tells me, "I want to be a nineteen-year-old girl, but that's back to my space age comics". Reading as an all-encompassing escape offers Alice the opportunity to construct her gender identity privately and safely. As way out and escape route from reality, reading provides a metaphorical pathway for several of my narrators, taking them from one (imagined) set of circumstances to another. These experiences of reading are recalled with integrity, and have meaning for my narrators.

Again and again, however, my narrators remembered immersive experiences-with-books as abutting and encompassing other, more materially situated ones. For Andy, even absorptive reading entails moving between two equally compelling modes: in this, he models the "bifocal" vision which Tatar suggests is only available to the adult reader (4). Andy comments that:

> while I was immersing myself in a book, I was also thinking about the language, and the structure, and the way they'd put things together, and the way they'd moved from one scene to another, and the way characters changed over time.

For Alice, the 'real world' and the world of the book overlay and inform each other. Here, she recalls reading Jack London's *White Fang* (1906) while at boarding school:

> in that book, as I remember, you've got the characters who are around you, in the school, because you've got these violent traders doing their thing, and then you've got the wolf, and you're trying to identify, because you are that wolf, and you're wandering through life, and these traders [...] you see, you're not allowed to go to the loo in the night or something like that [...] the books you're reading, you're finding solutions to all sorts of issues and problems. The dark wood.

The characters in the book – the "violent traders doing their thing" – are also "the characters who are around you, in the school". Alice herself identified with the wolf, White Fang, whose trials, "wandering through life", are mapped on to the difficulties Alice herself faced: "you're not allowed to go to the loo in the night". The book provides "solutions to all sorts of issues and problems". Both the world of the story, and her recalled childhood, are figured in this recollection as the "dark wood", a dangerous space to negotiate, but a navigation which might be accomplished *in* and *through* reading.

"The idea of reading a book", Jacobus comments, drawing on James Strachey's 1930 essay "Some Unconscious Factors in Reading", "quickly ushers in the idea of being in a room" (27). In tackling reading from a psychoanalytic perspective, Strachey, she notes, "surprisingly, turns out to have as much to say about the specific, materially located scene of reading as about its unconscious aspects" (27). It may seem surprising to Jacobus, but the "idea of being in a room", or other enclosed space, returns repeatedly in my narrators' accounts. Talking about reading, I discovered, produces memories of situated encounters with books and the positioning of the readers' body in relation to those books. Amy, for example, notes that "I know that I read *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* when I was in Primary Six and Primary Seven, 'cos I remember

what classroom we were in." Often these encounters occur in environments my narrators' recall in some detail, over and above memories of textual content.

"In bed", answers Alice, promptly, when I ask *where* she recalls reading in childhood and adolescence. "In bed", replies Kate. Jo remembers "just becoming completely drawn into the book, so you'd start reading it, and on and on and on and on, and I could read it, in the holidays I could stay in bed all day and read one book, right to the end of it." "I, sort of, almost associate being in bed and reading", Alice continues. She remembers "at the age of, it can only have been six, reading this Davy Crockett book, and it was four o'clock in the afternoon before anyone could finally get me out of bed, when I'd finished the book". Amy recalls reading "in the toilet", as a child – "much to my parents' annoyance because when I was a kid we only had one bathroom, and that used to get on everyone's nerves" – enabling her to delimit a certain kind of reading zone: "it's just like my space, you know, go and shut yourself in the bathroom, nobody can bother you". "When I was young", Kate explains, "I was allowed to have my light on till nine o'clock […] so I would try to go to bed early enough so I would have half an hour or an hour or something. And then later on, I, yeah it was usually my bedroom. Even into my teens." As she elaborates, the ways in which physical and metaphorical uses of reading space mesh become apparent. "Actually", she continues, she read in her bedroom "especially into my teens because I, it, yeah, my parents split up, and I think that was definitely a place to retreat and read". Her room is a place of greater safety, a "retreat", but the practice of reading is described metaphorically in very similar terms: "so I suppose then", Kate ventures, "reading was about, um, you know, sort of shutting yourself off".

One argument, then, might be that my narrators experience being 'taken away' by books and reading partly as a result of introjecting a post-Enlightenment ideal of the vehicular, transporting properties of print. Another way of approaching this might be through attention to the physical spaces they recall reading in, and how often these

conjure the reader as solitary figure, 'shut off' and alone with a book. Further to Jacobus's comments on Strachey's analysis of the scene of reading as "surprisingly" material, she notes its location "in the historically specific private and public spaces of his time" (27-33). Partly, readers might conceive of reading as immersive and transporting *because* they associate it with a growing understanding of themselves "as a bodily entity, occupying a particular historical, class-bound environment", as Jacobus puts it (34). For Eileen and Carol, especially – two of my narrators who grew up in unbookish, working class families – reading serves to separate them *physically*, from 'joining in' with family life or being seen to be 'useful', and *culturally*, as they retreat to an imaginative or intellectual space in which their families do not participate. Carol recalls that, during her childhood, her mother would "call up and say, what are you doing? and if I said reading, she'd say, come down and do blah" - 'blah' standing in for almost any other activity. "And if I'd said anything," Carol adds, "you know, picking my nose, she wouldn't have done, basically. So I learnt very early on not to say reading." Eileen remembers "absolutely disappearing into a novel"; novels and poetry became, as she puts it, "[p]art of my escape". She describes how, as an adolescent in a "very crowded" house, which she shared not only with her parents and younger sister, but several of her mother's sisters, who were all themselves under the age of seventeen, she would:

> go into my room, my bedroom, and turn on some music or other, drove my mother mad, she absolutely, in fact, again, both my mother and father quite hostile towards classical music, as being symbolic middle class thing [...] particularly warbling, as they called it, the singing, that they couldn't bear [...] I would play them, again in this spirit of [...] catching up with the world as it were. I knew there was this big world out there, and then, in the middle of that I would then read. And, um, I'd be up there for hours and hours.

Eileen used music to create an encompassing environment with a 'middle', an enclosing centre in which she could read, and from there, used reading to 'disappear'. This cultural consumption enabled her to carve out vital, private space for herself. Partly,

this space is metaphorical: the 'space' of her own tastes and desires, as opposed to those of her parents; her conception of the "big world out there" which 'disappearing' into books paradoxically enables her to access. These reading memories are, however, insistently situated *within* the material environment of her bedroom, and family home. "My mother still complains to this day," Eileen concludes, "'you never had your nose out of a book'."

Kate goes on to give a compelling example of the ways in which metaphorical *spaces* of reading and physical *sites* of reading fold into each other. "I was reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman",* Kate tells me, "and I was so engrossed that I realised it was, I was lying, I was in my room, lying on my bed, and it had gone dark, and I'd been struggling to read, but […] I was so engrossed that I didn't even think to switch the light on." Such was the psychological experience of reading that the sensory input from the novel itself initially numbed Kate to her own somatic needs; the experience of reading in some way *provided* an enlightening, overriding the necessity of the light that was required in very practical terms. It is only once pulled out of her engagement with the text that Kate realised she had not thought to "switch the light on". As Kate begins to describe the reading encounter to me, however, she first tells me that she is "so engrossed", and yet immediately pulls back from that absorption in the imaginative realm of the text to position herself with great specificity in physical space, at first describing the orientation of her body – she is "lying" – quickly followed by where – "in my room" – and where *exactly:* "on my bed". She then continues with a description of her material circumstances – "struggling" to make out the text in the dimming light – before once more referencing her response to the text – it has "engrossed" her – and then again situating herself in her now-darkened room. In considering reading as a practice, then, there are two intersecting spatial models at work. In these private spaces, my narrators are both cocooned and exploratory. Reading serves to embed my narrators in their real-world locations, as evidenced by their easy recall of these places

after several decades. Tethered securely, my narrators are thus enabled to venture, with varying degrees of absorption, into imaginative or fictional spaces.

Mapping these various readerly environments, from the reading that takes place within the "lair of the skull", in Benedict Anderson's phrase, to reading in the domestic spaces of the bedroom or toilet, I now want to pan outwards still further to the broader horizons opened up within and by reading and experiences-with-books (35). In critical discourse, the depiction and discussion of what might constitute a reader's 'inner world' is often facilitated through analysis of fictional landscape. Landscape acts as metaphorical substitution for readerly interiority, as well as the object of readerly attention within certain key texts. For Waller, childhood engagements with texts are figured as "emblematic waymarks on a journey to adulthood" within what she terms the reader's "life space", a composite cartography made up of real world reading spaces, "virtual worlds created through fictional spaces" and representational spaces of imaginative engagement or play (56-8). In mapping readers' remembered experiences-with-books and reading, Waller pays particular attention to robinsonades, desert island narratives inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), as, she comments, "they play out in salient ways forms of spatial engagement with remembered books" (57). Jacobus, using a more psychoanalytic framework, argues that the metaphorical affordances of 'landscape' usefully open up a space between reader and book equivalent to that between viewer and view, in that landscapes, like texts themselves, are always constructed, mediated, and "aesthetically and ideologically freighted" (54). Like reading experiences, landscapes also, she suggests, invoke "internal space, [...] states of reverie, withdrawal, [...] psychic retreat", "absence and distance" and even "looking away" (54). Jacobus discusses the complicated question of readerly interiority through such "literary landscape[s]" as Jane Austen's Sotherton, in *Mansfield Park* (1814) – "[a] bit arbitrarily", as she herself notes (53). Arbitrary, perhaps, because subjectively felt interiority may also find

productive correspondence with other fictional spaces or settings; in concentrating on fictional *landscapes* in this way, it is possible that other kinds of relations between 'inner' space and fictional space are overlooked. But my primary aim here is not to chart my narrators' 'internal landscapes' to the exclusion of external ones. Instead, I want to explore how my narrators' internal engagements with the landscapes of fiction connect with and affect their navigation of the wider world *outside* of the text. *Pace* Margaret Mackey, who writes of her childhood bedroom that "processing [its] details and functions [...] and its view of the outside environment" gave her "a core set of physical and ontological understandings of the world that would be essential in learning to make sense of the virtual universes of the different texts [she] encountered", certain reading experiences, I suggest, provide my narrators with vital, fictional examples of being-in-the-world that they *then* use to position themselves ontologically and pragmatically, in the world beyond the book (59).

From the earliest memories of reading to adolescent engagements with the Victorian novel, real landscapes and the landscapes of reading are mapped on to each other in charged and resonant ways in my narrators' accounts, as imaginative engagements with fictional settings overlay memories and experiences of actual material sites and places. Julia tells me that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was "really important to me when I was about fourteen, I absolutely loved that book". Julia connects her own religious, restrictive upbringing, with Jane's; her desire to find her own space with Jane's independence. She metaphorically situates herself within the novel: "I thought, this is about me. Or there's a bit of me in this." It is a reciprocity between reader and book – "a bit of me in this" – which extends beyond the abstract and into an unexpected discussion of material place. Embedded in her recollection of *Jane Eyre*'s significance to her teenage self, Julia reveals that:

> when I was fourteen, my father swapped with the vicar of Howarth, and we went to Howarth, […] into […] what is now the rectory, in Howarth, a really damp […] modern-build vicarage, and they went and stayed in our vicarage,

> and we got a three week holiday in Howarth, and I wandered around Howarth, feeling like Charlotte Brontë. And I'd be, you know, poking my nose into the Rectory and reading *Jane Eyre* and all that stuff.

From feeling herself to be somehow 'in' Brontë's novel, to finding herself physically in the village, even the building, in which the Brontës lived, Julia's anecdote is unusual in its very literal parallels between literary and lived experience. But this compelling interleaving of the readerly and the real plays out in various ways in the interviews I have gathered. Amy recalls a drawing she would compulsively reproduce in childhood:

> a house in the middle, with two windows at the top, two windows at the bottom, and a door, in the middle, at the bottom, and a garden that had like two flowerbeds, like just coming out of the front door, on either side of the front door. A path led up to a gate, and then a fence, in front, erm, curtains in the windows, and then a flat, typical kind of you know detached house roof. Erm, and then in the background it had like all these hills, and it was just like hills and hills and hills and hills in the background. I would draw a path that would go up into the hills, away and away and away.

She traces it to a distinctive illustration of hills in Roger Hargreaves' *Mr Men* books: "I'm sure I got that from the *Mr Men*," she tells me, "because it was very similar to that style". It maps, too, on to a real vista, the view from her childhood home, where her father still lives: "We have a huge window in the living room and you can see for miles into the distance", she adds, "And I guess I probably got it from that." These two attributions follow each other in Amy's speech, to create a composite picture, almost a palimpsest, as child-made drawing, remembered illustration and real view are overlaid.

For Amy, the uses made of space by the fictional characters in the books she loves provide direction and example for her own more bewildering life experience. As we move through her memories of childhood reading, another fictional setting she recalls is that of Moominvalley, created by Tove Jansson in her *Moomin* series (1945-70). In rather abstract terms – Amy is frustrated, during both of our interviews, at how difficult she finds it to express herself verbally, commenting that "this is a hell of an inarticulate way of me [...] to speak", "it's very confounding" – she sketches her sense

of the significance, in Jansson's work, of "nature", "the seasons", "being at one with your natural environment. And appreciating your natural environment". Moominvalley is for Amy:

> like an expansiveness, which is best captivated by the feeling of standing on top of a hill and having like a three hundred and sixty degree panorama, like. I guess it's opportunity and expectation and potential. There's incredible potential in *Moomin* books, in what might happen next. Like, the world is there to explore. And to know. And to understand. And to kind of commune with.

Amy's immersion into Jansson's world-building is such that she recalls experiencing as a child reader the sense that "the story was only a window into a massive potential world", that "all these characters had lives that went on beyond the role that they played in the book". And yet this immersion serves to situate and ground Amy, even now, in parallel real-world experiences. When she describes how the character Sniff, in *Comet in Moominland* (1951), sees a path or a river, and longs to be transported wherever that path or river may lead, Amy ventures that she "experience[s] exactly the same feeling" when hillwalking, or gazing out of the window across darkened countryside at the distant lights of a town; seeing a car "miles away, driving along a country lane. Or a train going along tracks", or "a patch where the sun is obviously beating down on one field. And maybe not on others". Amy describes this "feeling of emotion" as "being connected to this landscape that you're looking at, but also a feeling of longing, I think that's a good word for it [...] a longing to experience more of what you can see".

The way in which the figure of Snufkin, in particular, inhabits this landscape proves both inspirational and aspirational for Amy. A character who, Amy explains, "really spoke to me when I was a kid", she describes how Snufkin "wanders in and out and suits himself, so he just turns up with the seasons, and he's so liberated and free, and wise, you know". There is, she posits, a "kind of a wisdom" to his use of physical and social space, how he is "able to go off and then come back, and join in again". Crucially, she links her sense of Snufkin as "liberated and free, and wise" to an

emerging sense of her own queer selfhood. Snufkin "seemed really sage, you know. Like he could tell you a lot of stuff that would be useful to know". (The idea of 'knowledge', or 'useful stuff' revealed through reading, as linked to queer self-knowledge and authentic selfhood, is a concept that will be explored in more depth in the following chapter.) *Finn Family Moomintroll* (1948) "doesn't just speak to my sexuality", Amy explains, "it speaks to a lot about me, which was already in evidence as a child". Of the *Moomin* series as a whole, Amy comments that "there is queerness in those books about difference, and about finding yourself and about accepting other people, and you know, wisdom". Later in our conversation, she elaborates: "[e]verybody in those books has got room to grow, and they're encouraged to be themselves." As Kenneth Kidd reminds us, queerness may or may not be manifested as same-sex sexuality or gender identity, but is often expressed, instead "at the level of character – in the form of singular or eccentric kids like Jo March, or Harriet the Spy, or Pippi Longstocking" – or, perhaps, Snufkin ("Queer Theory's Child" 185). For Amy, Snufkin is decidedly queer; and the "me" Amy refers to – Snufkin "really spoke to me when I was a kid" – is implicitly a queer or protoqueer self. In "longing to experience more of what you can see", Amy is, I contend, grasping for the language to articulate a possible future for her child-self, sensing these works' "potential" to enable her to "explore", "know", "understand" and "commune with" the world from a distinctly queer vantage point.

For Amy, *Finn Family Moomintroll* offers an invaluable queer perspective. Like Snufkin, Amy too can "go off and come back, and join in again", through successive reading experiences. Aligning her textual adventuring in Moominvalley with Snufkin's own vagabond instincts, reading enables her imaginatively to inhabit this fictional physical and metaphorical space, and, in rereading, to revisit it. In so doing, and in comparing her affective response to the Moomins' fictional world with her own experiences of navigating the actual, physical world, Amy takes elements of Jansson's

worldview – liberation, and freedom, and wisdom – and incorporates them into her own. The book is, for Amy, sustaining, "like a check in". As she explains:

> if your internal psyche looks like that, then you're absolutely fine. Because that is a world where things are fine. Like, that is a nurturing world where all different parts of you are, are in alignment, are held securely. But with room to grow.

The world of the *Moomin* books is, for Amy, a "comforting world to live in, where everything is valued, everyone is valued". This "nurturing, comforting" aspect goes beyond the realm of her "internal psyche", however, as Amy explains how she has recreated something of the same environment in her adult life. "I kind of feel now that my life has that same potential," she comments in our second conversation, "and that same kind of compassion for people. Everyone, everything." Relating an episode in which Moominmamma packs a picnic breakfast for two characters in order that they might fulfil their wish of sleeping in a tree overnight, Amy says of her partner that she is "exactly the kind of person" who would do similarly; because it would be fun, because she "is a person who wants things to be nice". While Amy shies away from what she terms the "pat" interpretation that "I read that, and now I create my life like that" – which is, she says, "stupid" – there nevertheless seems to be a persuasive similarity in ethos between fictional and actual worlds. Jansson's novels contribute to Amy's capacity to create and articulate this ethos in her adult life.

In her discussion of Joanna Trollope's *A Village Affair* (1989), the ways in which setting and location allow Amy to position herself, imaginatively and politically, also bear closer examination. In reading Jansson's *Moomin* books, Amy experiences being "held securely" while having the freedom to 'wander'. In Trollope's fictional universe, opposing forces are at play; it is the homophobia and intolerance of wider society that threaten and disrupt the queer idyll which her protagonists are briefly allowed to inhabit. But Amy uses *A Village Affair*, too, as inspiration and example. Just as her reading of *Finn Family Moomintroll* allows her to make links between the world

of the text and her own domestic set-up, Amy attends carefully to the spaces of Trollope's novel in order to consider her own positioning outside the text. "The big kitchen table," Amy remembers. "The house. The garden. The fields. I guess the stuff where their relationship happens." Amy sees the small moments of harmonious lesbian domesticity picked out in the novel – Alice and Clodagh "with her kids, just having lunch" – as foreshadowing "a life"; a "tiny little window on to what could be". As an adult, Amy tells me that "my partner and I talk quite a lot about how much we enjoy our domestic life that we've created together. Which is," she admits, "very boring. It is stable, it is secure, it's cosy, it's what we want it to be". Beyond the comfortable domesticity Amy enjoys with her partner, she has also, consciously or unconsciously, gravitated towards Trollope's village setting in her adult life.

The space opened up by Trollope's representation of a lesbian relationship provided Amy with imaginative space in which to picture her future. She recalls as a teenager speculating about how she would live, like Clodagh, "in a big house that had a big kind of gravel drive up to it", in "some Cotswolds-y village, and be on all the committees, and be in charge of the bunting" – "[w]hich is strange" she comments, as an adult rereader, "because, obviously, everybody's horrible" in Trollope's fictional village of Pitcombe. She remembers rejecting the usual narrative which sees LGBTQ individuals migrating from rural to urban areas. "I've never felt the need to go off to the Big Smoke, to become myself," she explains. "London has never seemed like a Mecca, to me, in the way [...] it seems to be to a lot of other LGBT people". Rather, Amy constructed or 'became herself' through the more rural spaces of her childhood, and of Trollope's novel. "Why should *I* have to go somewhere[?]" she recalls asking in adolescence. "I think I'll just stay where I want and be as I am". It is a kind of "rebellious conservatism", as she puts it, "to want to be in the countryside and still be a big lesbian." To "come full circle on this," she admits in our second conversation, "me and my partner have just bought a house in Norfolk [...] it's part of a wider plan we have to

move there [...] and that place is full of committees and bunting. So, yeah, maybe that's all [...] still going to come to pass." Waller suggests that an "important part of childhood reading histories" is the "doubling or overlaying of fictional landscapes onto real places, whether in the process of play-acting or in the act of relating a text to familiar geospatial locations in the physical environment" (79). For my narrators, I argue this goes further than 'play-acting' or 'relating', manifesting as a far more necessary act of space-claiming, a way in which reading creates the conditions for possible futures. "Like I was saying with *Finn Family Moomintroll*," Amy explains of her memories of reading *A Village Affair*, "it kind of chimes with how my life is now". In such examples, the spaces of reading open up space for queer lives to unfurl. They provide, in Amy's phrase, "room to grow".

Murphy's doctoral thesis provides an excellent example of this interrelation between imaginative and lived experience, with particular resonance for two lesbian readers. She introduces her narrators Jane and Carrie, long-term partners who met and began a relationship in around 1964, while at university, where, writes Murphy, "they faced the constant fear of discovery and need for secrecy" (196). On graduating, the two women moved into a small cottage together, where their geographical isolation was matched by their cultural isolation: "'for women who were born in the first half of the century, there were no models,'" Jane explains. "'They did not know what a lesbian looked like, or ought to be like, or talk like, or act like. [...] We didn't know any other lesbians until...19..– we met in '63 or 4, and we didn't know another single lesbian until 19...6..8'" (197). The catalyst for this burgeoning connection and community was a book: Maureen Duffy's *The Microcosm* (1968). Murphy explains that Duffy's "realistic, well-rounded and ultimately positive depictions of lesbianism" were "an affirmation" for Jane and Carrie (197). Adding that the novel's main setting, a nightclub called The House of Shades, "provoked their interest beyond the boundaries of the page", Murphy relates how Jane and Carrie wrote to Duffy to ask where they, too, could meet other

women like themselves (197). Duffy, to their surprise, replied, advising the two women not only of the existence of the model for her fictional nightclub, London's The Gateways, but also about lesbian publication *Arena Three*. Jane and Carrie subscribed to the magazine, and, after a year or so, responded to an advert from another woman seeking friendship in their area. In time, they met around six other women, of various ages, who each helped to exemplify the realities and possibilities of living a lesbian life in 1960s and 1970s Britain. In this reading history, a novel introduces two readers to a fictional setting which maps directly to a real one. More broadly, it provides a discursive space which leads also onto the space of a lesbian magazine; it enables connections between people with shared identities, who otherwise felt themselves alone; it fosters community. Reading, here, also opens up Jane and Carrie's understanding of their own *selves*, their own lesbian subjectivities. As Jane comments, "'that was fortunate. I don't think everybody got that'" (197).

In the absorptive model of reading with which I opened this section, the passage between media, or dimensions, is a smooth one. There are no obstacles. Unlike Spufford, who experiences reading as a seamless dissolution of print, paper, and reading body, I have shown how my narrators' experiences-with-books return them to their material environments. But books and reading also delimit or close off conceptual and metaphorical space for LGBTQ readers. My narrators run up against metaphorical brick walls; they get stuck, disoriented; following a thread that seemingly frays and gives out on them, they are unable to parse certain interactions; and instead they stumble and circle back. This is a kind of 'getting lost' which, rather than dreamy escape, implies instead a half-understood, foggy notion of intended inference or meaning. And it is particularly in relation to gender and sexuality that these missteps or doublings-back seem to occur.

As a young teenager on the cusp of adolescence, Kate explains that reading was "about the difficulties of getting my bearings". She describes reading a series of "true

stories", "autobiographies" purchased by her mother, which were "about people from working class or disadvantaged backgrounds who had sort of made good in their life". These texts, are, she explains, "deservedly obscure" – "I don't think they were very 'good' […] in a literary sense" – but they were "emotionally involving"; stories of "people undergoing ordeals or triumphing over adversity". Kate recalls only "tiny little snippets", but one in particular "sticks", she "got snagged on" it. She recounts one particular episode that occurred in an autobiographical account of a girl growing up in an orphanage. The girl, a teenager, is in her first relationship with a boy – "they would go for walks together and occasionally hold hands but it was all very kind of platonic" – until a climactic moment when he "suddenly threw himself on her, on top of her, and there was this kind of moment of physical intimacy". "[T]he boy," Kate tells me, "disappeared and was never seen again", while the girl was overwhelmed by "deep shame" surrounding the encounter. Kate remembers "reading this bit over and over again", but remained puzzled as to its significance and implications. Why did the girl feel ashamed? What exactly was it that the boy had done? There were "bits of the jigsaw" that Kate was not in possession of; "things that I knew I wasn't getting", it was an episode she "couldn't work out": "Was there something that I was missing?", she asks. In retrospect, Kate is able to provide some answers. She can contextualise the story as one written "probably in the 1950s" and promoting the idea that "if women experienced any sexual desire then they were supposed to feel deeply ashamed". The depiction of a "character [who] was experiencing a sexual awakening" – particularly, I would suggest, a young, female character – was necessarily, then, "problematic". However, there is also what Kate terms the "heterosexual desire aspect of it", and it is this element that seems to provoke the most "confusion". Kate explains that "the things that stayed with me, were things that I couldn't equate with my own experience or my own sense of me as a sort of gendered or […] sexual being, […] at that age". Attempting to position herself in relation to the central character was less a matter of recognition

or identification than bewilderment and disorientation. “I suppose”, she continues, “I was kind of trying to get my bearings, and I couldn’t. That’s what reading was about. It was about the difficulties of getting my bearings”.

Kate uses a variety of metaphors to describe her reading experiences. Getting “snagged” on a memory of textual incomprehension suggests reading as a hike or a ramble, with aspects of the book’s content – a phrase, an image – as particularly ‘thorny’ and difficult; hard to pass, and to parse. Her discussion of the text as a jigsaw with “bits” she was “missing” suggests a different spatial arrangement, in which she brings her interpretive skills to the text in order to arrange and complete it, and unlock its overall ‘picture’ or meaning. But it is her phrase ‘getting my bearings’ in relation to her (mis)readings of sexual content that I want to highlight here, as it most usefully draws attention to Kate’s use of books and reading to position herself both inside and outside the text. To unpick this further, I draw on Sara Ahmed’s work on the spatial aspect of the term ‘sexual orientation’. Drawing on phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Ahmed asks what it means to be oriented, what difference it makes to be oriented towards some things and not others. How we learn to “find our way” (1)? How do we learn where we are, and where we will end up should we “turn this way or that” (1)? There are, Ahmed suggests, certain objects that helps us: “the objects we recognize, such that when we face them, we know which way are facing” (1).
Munt makes the connection between experiences-with-books, reading and sexual orientation more explicitly. “Books have been the building bricks of my butch orientation”, she writes (16). Like Munt, my narrators orient themselves both through specific texts, and through reading as a practice; books and reading offer my narrators a set of co-ordinates from which to navigate. My narrators equally demonstrate the disorientation that occurs through misrecognition.

At eighteen, Julia left home, and, released from her parents’ limiting and controlling environs, promptly “went off like a wonky rocket” – because, as she

explains, "I had no reference points for the world". Julia describes the profound impact of her first reading of Jeanette Winterson's semi-autobiographical 1985 novel*, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. She first came across the book shortly after she left home, "'cos that came on TV I think, 1989, or it came out in 1989 and I read it, and then I saw it on TV":

> And it was like oh my god, this is describing my childhood. And these are all the things that I don't understand. I have never understood about myself. All the crushes that I had on girls at school, um, the massive crush I had on my English teacher, you know. Um, yeah, it was, it was like a book that described a lot of the things that had, sort of happened or not happened to me, as a kid.

It was, she explains, "a real kind of moment of like, oh, someone understands what it was like. Someone gets it." There were "just so many echoes in it, of my grandmother, my father, my mother. People in the church. Old Welsh ladies". Reading something in which she could find these "echoes" profoundly altered Julia's ability to parse and find meaning in the text. Whereas in "trying to get a handle on what contemporary adult literature", Julia found herself adrift – "I didn't have a clue. I didn't understand it at all. I had no frame of reference" – she describes reading Winterson in quite different terms. "I tried to read *The Satanic Verses*, it went over my head. I tried to read *The Book and the Brotherhood*, by Iris Murdoch, […] didn't get it", but "when I read *Oranges* it was like, oh, […] this is a contemporary novel that I really, really understand, I really get it. This is about me. This is for me". It "really was quite an extraordinary reading experience. Because it felt like it gave me permission, it was like it's okay, you're not the only one. It happened to me too."

For queer readers, there is an added dimension to reading in childhood and adolescence; not only a necessary place to escape *into* – as Alice told me, "they take you away" – and a vital *alternative,* yet simultaneous, space to inhabit, reading is also a generative act of space-*creation,* in which the young queer reader can position and orient themselves. Reading provides a space from which, ultimately, they can read *from* or *out of*. Kate mentioned that her example 'wasn't very helpful' – because she couldn't

remember the name of the book she was talking about. Asked whether any particular book or reading memory *did* help her to 'get her bearings', she responded as follows:

> Well, I suppose I did read a lot of *Famous Five* […] there was quite an obvious difference in these versions of female identities in between Anne, who was like always making picnics and doing cleaning and George who very vocally rejected feminine stereotypes, so I mean I was obviously rooting for her, and […] thinking 'Yeah!' Like 'you don't have to do any of that girly stuff, you tell 'em'.

There, were, Kate goes on to explain "some quite explicit conversations I think between the characters" which "perhaps helped me to think or made me think about what sort of gender roles were available and what was permissible and what wasn't":

Because it seemed like she, like George created her own kind of space. And she was

> quite prepared to argue for it. She was quite prepared to say […] when she was told what it was that girls were supposed to do, […] she was quite prepared to contradict male opinion.

A character who is able to create "her own kind of space", to argue, speak out and contradict, is, I suggest, a co-actor, alongside Kate, in the Winnicottian "potential space" discussed above. George, as a character, offers Kate a way to refuse certain gender stereotypes – "what girls were supposed to do" – and behaviours – "she was quite prepared to contradict male opinion". Kate describes how she "would think about what I'd read, and I would sort of, you know, dwell on certain aspects of the plot, or the characters". She demonstrates an engagement with a text that is reflected on and expressed in spatial terms: "it was just about sort of lingering with the book", Kate explains, "and […] allowing it to sort of take up space in my mind". In occupying space in her mind, I suggest that these reading experiences allowed Kate to occupy a different kind of space *in the world*. Conversely, a lack of "reference points", as Julia describes, is disorientating both epistemologically, during the reading experience, as meaning can seem impossible to produce or parse, and ontologically, as the reader attempts to navigate unmapped or uncharted territory without the appropriate legend (or key)

that will enable them to decipher their surroundings and position themselves accordingly.

Rather than conceptualising reading as a purely cognitive or imaginative exercise, suspended in time and space, my narrators demonstrate that experiences-with-books and reading are always *also* material. While reading does figure as an escapist, transporting and immersive experience in the oral histories of reading I have gathered, it is also one that is informed by and influences my narrators' experiences of the world outside the book. In these narratives, metaphorical space is opened up, claimed, limited and closed off. My narrators orient themselves and position themselves within it. The model of reading in which the reader 'disappears' into the book occludes precisely the other aspects of reading and experiences-with-books that *Textual Preferences* seeks to investigate as equally defining and constitutive: the relations with the book as object, the situated aspects of reading, its temporal peculiarities. Far from "antagonistic" to the mental images produced by imaginative narrative, as Elaine Scarry has it, in these recalled experiences-with-books and reading the actual world and the world of the text continually overlay and reinforce each other; they are mutually constitutive, mutually expansive (qtd. in Price 2006 11-12).

From reading in private to reading in public

"I think for me", Julia explains, "books and writing were a […] means of deep privacy". Kate confesses to feeling "guilty and furtive" about reading, even when there "wasn't anything sexual about it": "if I was enjoying something maybe […] there was something a bit wrong", she adds. Her pleasure in reading "wasn't the kind of enjoyment that I would ever want to share with anybody […] whatever connection I had with books was my private thing, and that was the point of it, I think, that it was a private space." (Later, I ask her about her relationship to reading as an adult, and specifically about her participation in reading groups, or shared or communal reading experiences of any

kind. She remains a lone reader: "If I enjoyed it, I'd like to keep it to myself, thanks.") However, reading is never a transaction that occurs *solely* between reader and text. Instead, books circulate within a wider ecology, populated by those who sell, purchase, loan, censor, study and write them, as well as by those who read them. Negotiating the spaces of book culture, therefore – the library and the bookshop – is also formative in constructing queer selfhood. In this section I think through how LGBTQ identities might respond to and resist the kinds of classification offered by these more public spaces of reading. These spaces take on particular significance for the queer reader, who may have to negotiate the closed stack or the reserved stock list, the unyielding card catalogue, the gatekeeping librarian or bookseller. I consider, too, how LGBTQ readers' bodies might be inscribed by the "bodies of literature" available to them, in Melissa Adler's phrase (x); by the queer "corpus" (as opposed to canon), to adopt R. L. Goldberg's distinction, "mutable, evolving, flexible, open, exposed, exposing" (n. pag.). The reciprocities proposed here, therefore, go beyond the relationship between queer book and body, queer body and book, to consider not just 'inside' and 'outside' the book, the private relation between reader and book between the sheets or under the covers, but out in the world; the ways in which publically accessing reading matter might lead to a reader themselves being 'read' as LGBTQ.

To return to the example with which I opened this chapter: Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* became a kind of touchstone for Tony, "one of the first […] gay books I remember reading", he explains, in a life course during which "[o]ne of the things that's influenced me a lot is gay literature and gay novels". Some years later, in the early 1980s, Tony returned to the library, this time in order to borrow Radclyffe Hall's notorious 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness.* Suppressed on grounds of obscenity shortly after publication, *The Well* was not widely available in the UK until its reprinting in 1949 by Falcon Press. A certain stigma, however, continued to surround the novel; a whiff of impropriety not easily dispelled. Again, "[t]he book was on the

reserved stock list," Tony recalls, but – more self-possessed this time – he "went and ordered it" nonetheless. Hall's novel "had last been taken out in 1953", Tony notes. "This is in a local library, in Salford. And, I mean, I'm talking now about 1983 or '84, so it's thirty years since anybody had ever had *The Well of Loneliness*, from that particular library." He read the book, and returned it. "[W]hen the book was put back", he reports triumphantly, "they put it back on the shelves, not in the reserved stock list." Tony immediately requested another six of Hall's works: "I ordered all these books, and they were last taken out in the fifties […] all about the same time, 1952 or '53", he explains, conjuring their imagined reader, "I assume, some lesbian who lived in Swinton in the fifties, the last person ever to read any of these books". In bringing Hall's books out of the 'closet' of the reserved stock list and onto the general shelves, Tony reflects his own increased confidence in living openly as a gay man. Their liberation is both a significant political act in its own right, and a metaphor for Tony's own 'coming out', as the object of the book and the subject of the reader overlap and mesh. Like *The Well of Loneliness*, these volumes were all repositioned on the general shelves, visible, and freely accessible to the public. "I was", he concludes, "really really pleased about that."

Tony's interview is just one of those gathered as part of the Hall Carpenter Oral History Project, held at the British Library Sound Archive. Rather than specifically investigating books and reading, the conversation ranges widely across his Catholic upbringing, private and social life, and personal politics. However, it is this specific episode, that of "liberating Radclyffe Hall" in a public library in Salford – a small, private championing perhaps unnoticed by anyone else other than the librarian – that Tony chooses to highlight as "one of the things that I felt proud about" over a lifetime of achievements and activism. In Traies's doctoral work she identifies "spaces of liberation", wherein the women she interviewed "were free to (re)orient themselves and their desires" (148). Traies notes that these spaces "could sometimes be simultaneously repressive and liberating: school, for instance [...] could offer the

freedom to develop a sexual identity while loading that identity with stigma" (148-49). I suggest here that the library is another 'space of liberation', with this attendant acknowledgement that liberation and repression often occupy the *same* space, or are forces working in tension within a space. I will now explore the library as 'space of liberation' in more detail.

Libraries were, and are, "crucial safe spaces for many people", as Twitter user kate [sic] puts it in relation to a young person she had come across while working in a library, a "shy, nervous kid" who had asked to sit and read "any books for teenagers about being gay" carried by that particular branch, as he felt unable to read them in his own home (@_ednakrabappoly). Often libraries were "the only places to find books (fiction and non-fiction) about gay people", as Stephen Guy-Bray has commented of his own childhood experiences (@SGUYBRAY). Melissa Adler comments that, "we might imagine the library as a kind of Utopia – an island, in a sense, that houses a great bounty of literature and knowledge to which access is granted equally to all members of society [...] a perfect place" (xiii). The library space is indeed venerated by those I spoke to, often in terms strikingly similar to Adler's. Carol, for example, remembers her local, public library as a "paradise", whereas for Jo, being granted the agency and freedom to wander among and to choose books from the library shelves on reaching university was, she says, "like heaven".

The note of secular worship struck by both Carol and Jo resonates throughout my narrators' accounts, as libraries are variously and effusively figured as places of possibility, comfort, communion, adulation – and even salvation. My narrators recall various types of library over the course of our conversations: the mobile library van, the school library, the public library. In terms of the opportunities they offer to the questioning reading child or young person, each of these operates slightly differently – there is more or less physical space available for browsing, for example, or the prevailing classificatory systems and rules are of varying degrees of rigour, or they are

overseen by librarians who are more or less helpful or obstructive – or perhaps there is no designated librarian at all, as in the case of a primary school 'library' which is rather a collection of books housed in a corridor. Amy recalls the mobile library van that visited her rural Scottish primary school in the mid-to-late 1980s and early nineties. "That van had a lot of promise," she explains. "It was very exciting […] Like, what can I find in here?" "Living opposite the library saved me", Carol tells me in our first interview, "completely saved me." A clever, working-class girl growing up in 1960s South London, Carol read partly to escape an unhappy home life: "I read my way out of insanity […] to keep it together really." As a child, she visited the library "literally every day […] the librarian absolutely adored me". She remembers "really clearly standing in front of these shelves, which went along a wall, […] absolutely full of books, and I just thought, this is just paradise, imagine all these books, fancy all these books." For Jo, a young transgirl boarding at a repressive and austere boys' public school in the 1960s, the school library is remembered as both comfortable and comforting, a place she "loved": it had "a carpet. Colours. Comfy chairs" as well as "lots and lots and lots and lots of books." "It was", she tells me, "such an amazing escape" – "it" being both the library itself and the experience afforded by books and reading. "I love libraries", Jo declares slightly later in our conversation. Her next school had a "lovely library […] I loved reading there". At St Andrew's, where she went to university, there was a "fabulous" library, "old-fashioned […] with stacks"; "after our second year", she recalls, "they used to let us go into the stacks to pick books". It is this library that she describes as ""like heaven […] it was just, wow, so lovely".

Of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946-1959), as previously discussed in Chapter One, Andy says, "I remember borrowing the books from the library, the yellowed pages and the smell of library books and where I was when I read them". Here I want to focus not on the visual and olfactory sensory stimulation recalled as part of the reading experience, so much as what brackets this. The books are situated in a

particular context, and the memory of reading them also sites Andy as a reading body positioned in a certain space: the library. Andy develops Adler's idea of the library as a place of "great bounty", of intellectual sustenance. "Sometimes," Andy explains:

> I'd be looking at stuff in the library, and I would think, yes, […] that's an author I think I'm going to like, and I'll remember that, I'll put it back and I won't take it now but I'll know it's there, I'll know it's there to come back to. That's what I liked about libraries, I liked the fact that it was always going to be there and it wouldn't go away.

For Andy, the library allowed books to become "a resource, they were something you went to and you came back to." Andy elaborates on the specific nature of "reading library books, going to a library", in terms of community and connection with other bodies, other readers. Of the first book in the Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* series, *Titus Groan* (1946), Andy recalls that "it was a library book when I first read it. That was […] the first illustrated edition that came out in the fifties. And I must have been reading it in the seventies in a public library." Andy describes "going into [the library] and getting [the book] and reading it, and knowing other people had read it, and being able to look at the date stamps and see approximately when they'd read it", reading the material object in terms of its paratextual additions – the date stamps – and its social connectedness.

In an often hostile world, the "comfort" of the library might also, in part, be derived from its rules and systems, an ordering or a containing of the otherwise chaotic or unstable. The cycle of borrowing and returning books from library, for example, can create a dependable, known and easily repeated reading experience. As Amy comments on her childhood reading and rereading of Nicholas Fisk's *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* (1980), "I just kept taking it out of the library over and over and over again". Responding to the library space as a containing, safe and sustaining environment, Carol recalls its organisational system in spatial terms: "it was three walls, and that wall was little kids, and that wall was for kids up to twelve, and that wall was the […] non-fiction […] I remember where it was, because the books went that way". Recalling the

placement of the books and their age-bound and generic classifications enables Carol to access more detailed memories of particular titles: "So, I read them, *The Sto-, The Life of a Probation Officer*, *The Life of a Policewoman, The Life of a Nurse, The Life of* this and that and that and that." She corrects her verbal slip from "*Sto*[ry]" to "*Life*", a paratextual signalling of these books' status as biographical non-fiction which lines up with her memories of their position within the library, "round the corner, on the same bit of wall". Her description of "*The Life of* this and that and that and that" is a syntactic mirroring of the cases "absolutely full of books" that Carol encounters within the library; multiple volumes arranged, spines out, along the shelves. A progression from the children's to the adult section of the library entails learning to read not only a new selection of texts, but a new set of paratextual clues and codes, a new order of classification, a new shelving system. Carol, like the teenage protagonist in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), "started at the As and worked my way through."

Andy tells me how, "with books that you borrowed from libraries, you could tell from where they were in the library what they were about. Oh, this is biography, this is fiction, this is this sort of book". "And in those days", he continues, echoing Tony Openshaw's reflections on reading Radclyffe Hall's novel after a borrowing gap of some thirty years, "public libraries were somewhere […] you could go to look for something […] and it might not have been borrowed for twenty-five years". "Sometimes you'd find books that were very obscure that no-one had looked at," he adds. Price writes of "the intimacies and antagonisms that the book establishes between buyer and seller, lender and borrower" and, in a particularly nice phrase, "even between strangers who handle the same piece of paper unbeknownst to one another" (*How to Do Things* 12-13). Alert to the social spaces within which this "handl[ing]" takes place, and to the book as carrier of meaning but also as object, as "piece[s] of paper", it is precisely these "intimacies and antagonisms" that accounts such as Tony's, Andy's and the other oral

histories I have gathered as part of this research allow us to trace. The unlooked at or undiscovered potential within the public, shared space of the library is a suggestively queer conjunction, an in-plain-sight disguising of something that might be very necessary to a particular reader.

The library has historically fostered specific pleasures for the LGBTQ reader. On first hearing "lesbian" as a teenager in 1945, Sandy Kern "ran to the library … and looked up the word *lesbian* and I felt so proud of myself" (56). For the curious and questioning, those bent on carrying out what Doris Lunden refers to in another oral historical account as "the research that I think has been done by so many lesbians throughout history", the library is a vital portal (110). However, another of my narrators, Mary – a gay woman in her mid-forties – recalls her bafflement, on the cusp of adolescence, "standing in front of the adult shelves, going how do you decide what to read? How do you negotiate it?" For many LGBTQ readers, this negotiation of the "adult shelves" can be a particularly delicate or risky business. Finding and locating information is also not only emotionally or socially fraught but often practically difficult. As Adler writes, "the idea of a library as a perfect place crumbles when we understand how access by subject is organized" (xiii). Far from a "paradise" in which readers can finally become legible to themselves, labelled, classified and therefore understood, the library's policing of disciplinary boundaries seems, instead, controlling, restrictive, painfully exposing. "Even looking at books was scary", Nancy Garden admits, in an interview with Kathleen T. Horning appended to the 2007 reprint of her teen lesbian coming-of-age classic, *Annie on My Mind*, "let alone buying them or taking them out of the library […] what if someone saw?" (242). Reading is, after all, inescapably a social act. "Friends of mine from an earlier generation who were interested in investigating sexuality and sexual identity", commented Johanna Drucker during the AHRC "Books and the Human" debate held at Central Saint Martins, London, in December 2015, "were timid about going to the section of the library where the

books were stored on the shelf." Price similarly suggests that we have "much to learn from the layout of libraries and bookshops" ("Reading" 312). *To read* – particularly in a public library, subject to the scrutiny of others – is also *to be read*. (And by "to read", here, I mean to participate in the act of reading, in its precursors, and in those social encounters that surround it; identifying and choosing reading material from the shelves, for example, or negotiating access to it via its gatekeepers or in full view of others who may be browsing nearby.) The example with which I opened this chapter, of Tony Openshaw's experiences with Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* and Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, demonstrates the very real fear and shame that an LGBTQ individual might feel in publicly associating themselves with a particular author or text – Tony's paranoid, illogical causality of "she would *know* I was gay" if he so much as verbalised his request for Crisp's book, as if there could be no other possible reason for wanting to read it.

When Garden "finally found the courage to look homosexuality up in a public library card catalog – no computers in those days – ", she explains, "I did find a few adult books listed, but they were always unavailable. That was a subtle form of censorship, I'm pretty sure" (242). To read *The Well of Loneliness* as a teenager in 1950s America, writes science fiction author Joanna Russ, "you had to go to the locked room in the college library and explain why you wanted it" – "a requirement", she points out, "that effectively prevented me from getting within a mile of it" (xxxiii–iv). Like Tony, Russ found the requirement to verbalise her desire for the book an impossible request to fulfil – as if to explain her desire for the book would be to explain herself, her own desires, and have them judged (and found unacceptable, or lacking). Unlike Tony, Russ was unable to find a workaround, to diffuse the need to speak by writing "a little note" to the librarian. Kath Weston recalls her own "raid on the college library" during which she "uncovered" a copy of Violette Leduc's 1966 "boarding school romance" *Therese et Isabelle*. "Hands shaking", Weston checked out the book

with “a borrowed library card” (259). Dissociating herself from the borrowing of the book – disguising herself – reading here feels like a criminal act, Weston forced to assume an identity other than her own, even as she is attempting to bring her own identity into the light.

The library, then, is a defining and a producing space, holding in constant tension its status as a space of *both* containment and liberation. Adler elucidates this in her discussion of the US Library of Congress, when she notes the “paradoxical nature of classifications” that both “divide and define”. Classification systems operate by “naming categorization, exclusion and control”, “segregating” some books from others, they are “constraining and bound by relations of power” (x-xii). It is precisely these techniques, however, which also “bring bodies of literature to life by placing related books together and making them accessible”; which put “books into play with others within certain disciplines”, and which, in effect, bring “library subjects into being” (x-xii). Subjects – in the sense of individuals – can also be defined and bound by reading and their interactions with books. Issues of sexual self-definition and textual definition are, in this way, bound together; further, the concept of *definition* works in two ways. To define something is to label, name, explain it, to pin it down. It is also a throwing-into-relief, an inherent acknowledgement of *what it is not,* a sharpening of edges and boundaries. For queer subjects, these limitations and possibilities have a particular significance; to be able to name (or be named), recognise and situate oneself as a non-normatively gendered or sexual subject is to be able to *claim* that subjectivity, with agency and self-possession. This, in turn, facilitates for these individuals a world in which it might be possible to move more freely – even if that world, at the point of reading, exists only or predominantly between the covers of those books in which such naming or recognition occurs. Furthermore, a defined and contained sense of self enables connections with others to flourish: one of the ways that reading changes space is in the forging of community and connection, both real and imagined, private

and shared; between readers, between reader and author, between reader and character.

In making this case for the library space as a crucible for emerging LGBTQ identity – I use crucible in the double sense of both container and of ordeal – I have drawn on several anecdotal examples outside of those gathered through the oral-historical element of this study. However, libraries, in my narrators' accounts, are clearly established as safe, sustaining environments, in which and about which it is possible to feel passionate attachment. They are also places of confusion and disorientation. In addition, the library can offer a more transgressive experience. During a brief period of a "week or two" in which her father, a painter and decorator for the local council, was redecorating the school premises, Amy was allowed to stay at her primary school "after hours" – between the end of her last lesson and the close of her father's working day – and "would hang about the school, until he was finished". It was during one such unsupervised dérive through the deserted school corridors that Amy had the "transformative", "physical" and highly situated experience of reading Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* (1948) for the first time – the memory of which she recounted to me in our first conversation. Browsing, she stumbled across Jansson's story: "I took it out and I started to read it and I sat on the floor in the corridor and just read it, because I was totally absorbed with it […] from the get go", she recalls in our first interview. In our second interview, Amy returns to this memory, recounting it with almost identical phrasing: "I remember very, very clearly that I picked it out, started to read it and became so absorbed in it that I was just sitting on the floor in the corridor reading it". Bounded by the distinct memory of a particular time and place, Amy's account is boundary-crossing, too: both spatially and temporally. She has "the run of the place", transgressing the usual restrictions of the strictly coded school environment. She is there "after hours", able "to pick all these books at random that you don't really have time to do when you're actually doing your lessons". Aware

that Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll* "was in the school library, so you know, it's within the parameters of what the school thinks you should read", she nevertheless stresses that "I genuinely found it by myself […] I didn't even find it in school time."

Contingency seems pertinent to a discussion of the construction of identity in and from material environments. Just as the library is mediated by the classification system, the catalogue, the stock list or the librarian, the bookshop is mediated, in its own way, by issues of stock, store buyers' decisions, publishers' incentives, by labelling and merchandising, the layout of shelves. But libraries and bookshops, while inescapably mediated, are also spaces of possibility, variance and the chance encounter; when these spaces are exclusionary or inaccessible, the options for how it is possible to live and to *be* are similarly shut down. To serendipitously find a wanted book, perhaps especially in an unexpected location, brings with it the excitement of purposive browsing repaid. "I read a lot of other Nicholas Fisk things, when I could find them" Amy comments, after her discussion of reading Fisk's *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair* in her local library. "These were the days before Google, when you would see [a book] in a jumble sale and be like, 'oh, wow, Nicholas Fisk'. In the previous chapter I discussed Amy's reading and rereading of Joanna Trollope's 1989 novel *A Village Affair*. Her journey *to* that book is also one she recounts in some detail. "The day after that was on TV," she tells me, "I went up to WH Smith, I must have asked my mum to take me up to the […] Menzies, as I guess it then was, in Lanark, to see if I could find this book, and lo and behold they did actually have it in this tiny Menzies". Amy later describes how at the age of "[f]ifteen, sixteen. I used to go into Glasgow. It was about fifty minutes on the train. And me and my friends used to go in of a weekend, and just hang out in the shopping centre, and eat chips, and whatever, but I also used to go in on my own, sometimes". On these solo expeditions, she would visit "a Waterstones that had an LGBT section"; if she was accompanying her mum, "I maybe didn't let her see what I was buying". This particular Waterstones is imbued with importance in Amy's

self-narrative as "that is where I first bought books about lesbians". She recalls the awkward, and yet not wholly surprising, placement of "very dense political tomes" next to "lesbian erotica". It is a browsing and book-buying memory which might strike a chord with many young lesbian readers, particularly those based in the UK, who found themselves searching for material in that fallow period between the flourishing feminist and lesbian presses of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the post-Section 28, 'gay YA' publishing boom of the mid-late 2000s and beyond. There is purpose and planning involved in some of these journeys-to-books, yet these expeditions also retain a certain aleatory quality.

Outside of the mainstream booksellers, books colonise and expand other, more marginal commercial spaces or events: the drugstore, the bus station, the village shop, the jumble sale. Amy recalls "a very small independent bookshop that opened up in Lanark, and it was on the way back to my granddad's house, where I used to go after school every day", where she purchased Christopher Pike's horror stories as a young teenager. "I used to just go in there and sit and browse the books", she remembers. "It was such a tiny shop, it was like the space, the size of this office". Kate recalls a "village shop with a whole little rotating stand of *Famous Five* books. Amy "read *Trainspotting* on the plane to America with my family." She was "absorbed by this thing on the plane, you know, I was reading and reading and reading and reading and reading […] I think I bought it in the airport actually". Kate reflects that although her parents were not "bookish" – "I mean", she explains, "they had no sense of the canon whatsoever" – she grew up surrounded by books: "the house was just full of second hand books that my mum had picked up at jumble sales". Her reading, therefore, was in one sense indiscriminate, unguided; there was, she says "no direction […] my dad would never say, 'why haven't you thought about reading James Joyce?' or 'you should read this that and the other'". And yet, she realises "my reading was shaped by my mum in the sense that what caught her eye at the jumble sale was what I would read". From "leather-

bound *Reader's Digest* condensed novels" to "oh god! – those vet books. James Herriot". "My mum kept finding those at the jumble sale", Kate explains, "and so I read those."

'Chance', however, takes on additional significance when considered as one element of a process of sexual self-discovery *through* books; the "hermeneutic voyage" identified by Sedgwick (207). "In childhood," writes Greene, "all books are books of divination, telling us about the future, and [...] they influence the future" (13). On learning to read, he comments that "this was the dangerous moment. I was safe so long as I could not read [...] but now the future stood around on bookshelves everywhere" (13). For Greene, "that is why books excited us so much" (13). Kennicott, too, emphasises the "process of finding" books, the "thrill of reading them" (n. pag.). He writes that "the physical fact of a book was both a curse and a blessing"; not only is reading – the divining of crucial knowledge about (homo)sexuality, evidence of a possible future life – "a potentially dangerous act", but he must first "physically find and possess the book" (n. pag.). Possession, here, carries an erotic double meaning; shades of Lynch's "cruising", Bechdel's "ravish[ing]". For the young LGBTQ reader, these divinatory and serendipitous aspects of the reading experience contribute to a kind of sexual self-fashioning peculiarly bounded by books; the future that "stood around on bookshelves" may exist, for these readers, at these moments, *only* on bookshelves and within certain covers, waiting to be discovered.

Conclusion

Reading, as Jacobus notes, summons a "strange territory that is perpetually being renegotiated in [...] intersubjective exchange" between the reader and what is being read (234). Jacobus suggests psychoanalysis is also characterised by just such an exchange; I propose that oral history also focuses attention usefully on this "strange territory". In this chapter I argue that attention to LGBTQ oral histories of reading disrupts a conventional narrative of 'losing oneself' in a book and 'seeing through' the

physical object; immersive reading-as-escapism. Rather, attention to LGBTQ reading histories shows how the situatedness of the physical object of the book, and the positioning of the reading body, are foregrounded in everyday accounts of reading. LGBTQ individuals' memories of reading demonstrate how reading and encounters-with-books strengthen and reinforce queer identities and ontological possibilities in the world outside of the text. I have shown how LGBTQ reading histories reveal the ways readers use books and reading to orient and position themselves, moving from a consideration of readers' private and metaphorical sites and spaces of reading, and from there, considering the significance of the places and spaces of book culture more broadly: the library and the bookshop. Queer subjectivities are both defined and produced by the social embeddedness of reading and engaging with books, and the spaces of book culture. Bringing work on LGBTQ cultural space together with work on the spatiality of reading, this chapter argues that books and reading create cultural and discursive space for my narrators. Further, my narrators' memories of physical reading spaces are an important source of extratextual meaning, which inform and are inflected by the textual. Lastly, reading spaces inflect meaning for LGBTQ readers; and reading and experiences-with-books alter and charge physical spaces. Books and reading extend ontological possibilities for these readers – offering a space to *be.*

Chapter Three
"Reading for something queer to be in there": The practice and process of queer reading

"[N]ow it looks like some kind of S&M lesbian sex scene, drawn from a very male perspective", Kate tells me (see fig. 7). She is describing an illustration in a book, one stumbled upon while browsing at a jumble sale, some years prior to our first conversation. Remembering how she had enjoyed the book in childhood and "slightly amused and nostalgic to find it" again, she bought it. "And then even more recently I read it," she continues. The book was Ruby Ferguson's 1950s pony story *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies* (1954), and what Kate found in its pages surprised her. On this later reading, the illustrations seem to have acquired a different cast. "Some of them," she explains, "are hilarious". The drawing she describes is one in which Jill, "sulking at home" because "she can't go to the gymkhana", is visited by two friends, Ann and Diana. In the picture, Kate tells me, Jill is "lying on her bed" with "these two friends in jodhpurs [...] brandishing riding crops, standing over her". There is, she realises, a "level of smut and suggestiveness [...] that is evident from an adult perspective, looking at this picture". Indeed, the book, on rereading, seems peculiarly saturated with innuendo. "[E]ven the title", Kate reflects, giving the word 'enjoys' a mildly sexual slant, "is suggestive and funny and smutty".

Kate is not the only reader to respond to *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies* in this way. On republication in 1984 by Knight Books, an imprint of Hodder and Stoughton, Ferguson's novel was renamed *Jill and the Runaway.* As Jane Badger, author of *The Pony Book in Children's Fiction* (2013), writes on her blog, "[b]y the less innocent 1980s, the double entendre of the title was too much for Hodder" (n. pag.). With her comments about "S&M lesbian sex", "friends in jodphurs [...] brandishing riding crops", "smut and suggestiveness", Kate is making a queer reading: an interpretation, one produced as an adult, looking back at a childhood favourite. To read such sexual content into an

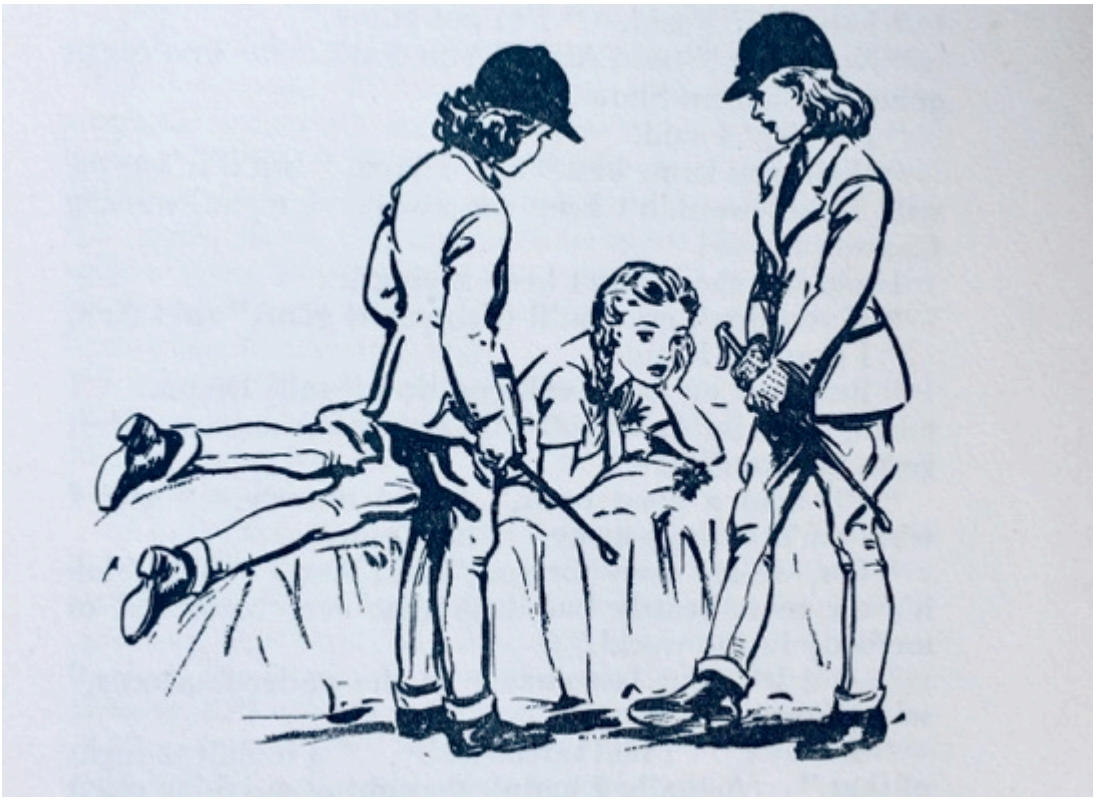


Fig. 7. Illustration of Jill, Ann, and Diana, by Caney, in Ruby Ferguson's *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), p. 11.

unexpected source is perhaps the most overt form of the practice of queer reading, or 'queering' – the latter term being, as Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele note, a contraction of the former (102). Indeed, at the outset of this research I expected to find several examples of similar subversions within my narrators' reading histories, as they rethought books from their childhood and adolescence in light of their adult identities. But while "you can queer–read anything", Amy tells me – "god, everybody's talked about Noddy and Big Ears […] it was in the newspaper that it was bad for children, it was warping their minds to have Noddy and Big Ears sharing a bed" – such interpretations were far from prevalent within the accounts I gathered for this study, as this chapter will go on to discuss.

Kate argues, moreover, that her overtly sexualised reading of *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies* is "not necessarily to do with me queering it". Rather than something specific to her own lesbian selfhood, she posits that this interpretation would be "evident" to any

adult reader. (The reader of this thesis is invited to make up their own mind on this point – see Figure 7.) Instead, the readings Kate makes which do seem to speak to her lesbian subjectivity are of a different character; less sexual, more tentative; concerned with misreadings or misunderstandings, and 'making sense' of ambiguous queer feelings, as I discuss in more detail below, and again in the following chapter. Indeed, overall, *Textual Preferences* reveals a complex cluster of reading practices enacted by LGBTQ readers which are at once more instinctive, subtle and intimate than the kind of reading Kate makes, "jokingly", in relation to Ruby Ferguson's Jill, Ann and Diana. Hard to isolate or pin down through direct questioning, these reading practices are nevertheless woven throughout the material gathered for this study, taken as a whole. In addition, reading as a *process* – by which I mean, an ongoing behaviour or activity separate to the uses of books and the spaces of book culture so far explored in this thesis – emerges as an endeavour closely bound to the construction of queer selfhood over a reading life. Perhaps these more nuanced findings should not have come as a surprise. I described in the Introduction my narrators' varied responses to the term 'queer', its multivalency, how it comes loaded with conflicting emotions: anger, mistrust, confusion, shame, pride. It follows that a practice named as 'queer reading' might be equally complex; that there might be various ways of reading gathered under the rubric of the broadly 'queer'.

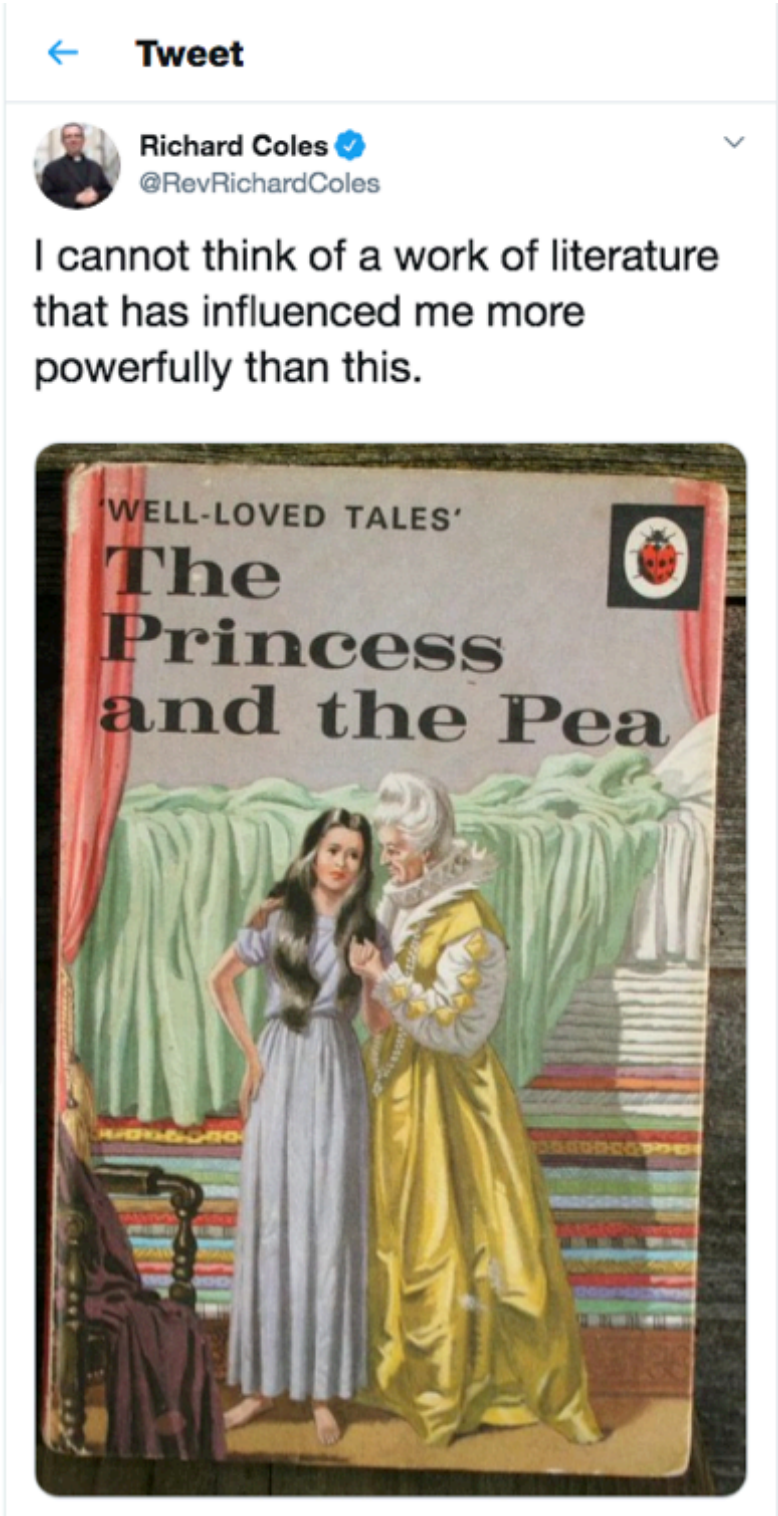
These ways of reading are the focus of this chapter. In the previous two chapters, I use LGBTQ adults' remembered and recalled experiences-with-books to throw light on the sheer oddness of the book-as-object, making a case for the queer potential of books as things. I then examine how books and reading help to position LGBTQ readers in metaphorical and physical space. In what follows, I ask how certain books capture the attention of LGBTQ readers, and how they hold it. What kinds of attention do LGBTQ readers pay to the texts they recall reading in childhood and adolescence? And how do the books in question repay such attention? I examine three

different readerly modes, or stances: reading as recognition, as research and as decoding. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these ways of reading are, to a large extent, fused in practice and in my narrators' accounts; nevertheless, I separate them out here in order to analyse their particular workings. Firstly, I look at queer readers' engagements with paratexts – their experiences of and experiments in finding what Alison Hennegan refers to as "the 'right' book […] however unlikely its disguise" (166). Secondly, I consider 'queer reading' as a form of close reading. Here the reader "wring[s] significance", "pore[s] over paragraphs" and "extract[s] meaning" from texts, in my narrator Amy's words. Finally, I investigate the subtextual aspects of queer reading, plotting the means by which readers identify hidden or coded elements of story, characterisation or episode. Here I position the reader as attuned, as several of my narrators separately put it, to "traces", "undercurrents", "hidden messages", and "codes" within the works they consume. But before tracing these practices and processes within my narrators' accounts, I first outline some of the wider debates around reading and sexuality, and the ways they are brought to bear on each other.

What makes the queerness of a queer reading?

"I cannot think of a work of literature that has influenced me more powerfully than this," posted cleric, broadcaster, and multi-instrumentalist former member of pop group The Communards, the Reverend Richard Coles, on social networking site Twitter in November 2015 (@revrichardcoles). Accompanying his tweet was an image: the Ladybird edition of *The Princess and the Pea*, written by Vera Southgate and illustrated by Eric Winter, first published in the 'Well-Loved Tales' series in 1967 (see fig. 8). In pastel tones, Winter portrays two women clasping hands. The older woman – the queen – is sumptuously attired and stands in profile, one arm around the younger, who is simply dressed, with long, dark hair and an anxious demeanour. Behind them, a stack of cotton-covered mattresses, head-high, curtained with heavy pink drapes held back

Fig. 8. "I cannot think of a work of literature that has influenced me more powerfully than this": the Reverend Richard Coles tweets his appreciation of the Ladybird edition of *The Princess and the Pea*, written by Vera Southgate and illustrated by Eric Winter (@revrichardcoles); *Twitter*, 28 Nov. 2015, 3:31 p.m., twitter.com/RevRichardColes/status/670503501173272580.



by gold braid; the bed is unmade, its sheets and coverlet in disarray. The scene is part-medieval, part-Victorian, rendered in the palette and style of a 1950s magazine advertisement; a cosy fairy-tale composite. With its familiar dimensions and layout – the Ladybird colophon in the top right hand corner, the left-justified sans-serif, capitalised series name and serif book title overlaying the illustration – this book cover is easily identifiable to generations of readers. The story, too, is easily recalled: based on a Hans Christian Andersen tale, it tells of a young woman revealed as a princess after she is kept awake by a single pea placed under twenty mattresses and twenty feather-beds; her royalty confirmed, she marries the prince and concludes the story in the traditional manner. In archly acknowledging how "powerfully" this book affected him, however, Coles expresses more than simple nostalgia for a "Well-Loved Tale". "I just want to know why and how it influenced you", enquired Twitter user @Tighnacoille – to which Coles replied, "that there may be happy endings for the ultra sensitive" (@revrichardcoles).

Coles's attribution of 'influence' is useful as a way to conceptualise some of the wider historical debates about the interplay between books, reading and queer self-fashioning. Indeed, his willingness to claim this particular book's influence so publically may in itself be something of a tongue-in-cheek nod to such debates. The fear that reading may unduly 'influence' the reader plays into a set of ideas about literacy, sexuality and morality, which can be traced at least as far back as the eighteenth century. Caroline Gonda sums up this period's conception of a "seductive relationship between fiction and female sexuality", including fears that the reading of novels, in particular, was dangerously immersive, morally degrading, and overly exciting of bodily sensations, aptly citing George Colman's *Polly Honeycombe, A Dramatick Novel of One Act* (1760): "'A Man might as well turn his Daughter loose in Covent-Garden as trust the Cultivation of her Mind to A CIRCULATING LIBRARY'" (1). To more explicitly link such concerns about reading to non-normative or queer sexuality, a little over

three weeks after the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* on 27 July 1928, the *Sunday Express* journalist James Douglas wrote in an editorial that he "would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul" (10). These supposed dangers of reading-as-contagion, or as a kind of indoctrination, continue to resonate throughout the 1980s, spreading even into our contemporary moment. Susanne Bösche's 1981 *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin,* the picturebook which detonated Section 28, published in the UK in 1983 by Gay Men's Press, was vilified as homosexual propaganda by the British tabloids. "VILE BOOK IN SCHOOL" ran a headline in *The Sun* newspaper on 6 May 1986; "SCANDAL OF GAY PORN BOOK READ IN SCHOOLS" proclaimed *Today* on 7 May – taking, as Clyde Chitty notes, the misinformed position that the book was in use in a London primary school classroom, rather than merely being available for teachers to consult in a London Teacher's Centre (137). A BBC documentary on anti-LGBTQ sex education in schools, broadcast in July 2019, features retired religious studies teacher Pauline Gallagher, who, questioned by interviewer Sima Kotecha on whether the children's books promoted by the LGBT-inclusive No Outsiders programme "are making children gay", responds baldly, "that's what they're designed to do" ("Sex Education: The LGBT Debate in Schools" 16:57-17:05).

Set against such paranoid notions of reading's corrupting influence, twentieth century historians of sexuality frame the uses of literature – of all kinds, from pamphlets to short stories – made by LGBTQ readers in more positive terms. Martin Meeker, for example, argues that access to media, including print, *produced* queer communities for both men and women in post-war America. Meeker takes the view that before coming-to-knowledge of their own sexualities and identities, LGBTQ individuals first had to be able to access that knowledge via various communications networks, including catalogues, books, newspapers, magazines, journals, circulars and newsletters (2-3). Laurie Marhoefer draws on oral histories of women in Weimar

Germany, retrieving testimony from women who reported that reading allowed them to access previously unsuspected lesbian desire (69-70). With print making lesbianism conceptually and materially visible to many women for the first time, reading was a crucial stage in a process of becoming queer, providing an answer to a question of selfhood that, as Marhoefer points out, was as much epistemological as biological for many women (71-77). The so-called 'seduction thesis' – in other words, the idea that 'normal' readers could be lured into homosexuality through reading – with its roots in the eighteenth century (and still in circulation today, as the Gallagher example above illustrates) is thus subverted and reclaimed. In this context, Coles's claims about 'influence' can be read as validating of his adult sexual identity. 'Influence' is therefore established as a complicated term, mobilised both by those who would seek to suppress LGBTQ personhood, and those who seek to be liberated into it. I set out this context here as background for my narrators' responses, and as acknowledgement that their own conceptualisations of the interplay between reading and identity may be inflected by certain aspects of these currents of thought.

Furthermore, Coles's Twitter exchange can be usefully read as an alternative example of queer reading, a counterpoint to that with which I opened this chapter. His coy use of "ultra sensitive" to describe his child self hints at something non-normative in gender or sexuality. Deployed by both homosexual and heterosexual commentators, "sensitive", like "artistic", has passed into the cultural lexicon as a euphemism for effeminacy (T. Murphy 56; Dessaix n. pag.). In Coles's public acknowledgement of this book's personal significance to him there is also a knowing and deliberate activation of camp's layered effects. Camp, according to Susan Sontag, is a doubling, concealing mode. "Behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing", she states in her influential 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'", an attempt to define some of the various, shifting elements of this mutable and "fugitive sensibility" (281, 277). Hailing a mass-marketed children's book

as a "powerfully" influential "work of literature" embodies camp's appreciation of popular culture, its "democratic *esprit"* (289). Being "serious about the frivolous", as Sontag puts it, is another of camp's qualities (288). In line with its "extremely sentimental" relation to the past – "so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned", notes Sontag – Coles's championing of this "Well-Loved Tale" aligns with Sontag's observation that "[w]hat was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic" (280, 285). Winter's illustrative style further illuminates the camp iconography of the Ladybird book. 'Camp art", Sontag writes, "is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content" (278). That a man in middle age might display *The Princess and the Pea* as evidence of a "happy ending" for his child-self; that the book in question is an abridged fairy tale with female protagonists, including a 'queen', that shorthand for a certain effeminate masculinity; these facets combine with Coles's public persona as a proudly out gay man to position his reading of *The Princess and the Pea* as inflected by and reflective of his sexuality: as queer and, adjacently, as camp.

In framing Coles's tweet in this way, I am attempting more here than a "zany" queer reading of my own. Through his conjunction of book cover, continued affective engagement in adulthood with a book from childhood, and his own gloss on its significance, Coles's Twitter exchange helps to separate out some of the ways in which reading might be considered queer, over and above the "smut and suggestiveness" of queer reading's most simplistic application. His affective response – the book's connection to his own 'ultra-sensitivity' – suggests a sensibility which clings to the book and which is peculiarly aligned to the queer. His seemingly serious engagement with this title as "a work of literature", even if delivered with a certain bathos, suggests a reader searching for recognition and for knowledge about himself. Lastly, as my interpretation through the lens of camp shows, Coles's reading allows queer subtext to emerge from such an unpromising site as the Ladybird book. The 'influence' of *The*

Princess and the Pea, then, proceeds in more than one direction – from text to reader, but also from reader to text. Rather than being passively acted-upon, Coles demonstrates his own agency in taking necessary cultural nourishment, stimulation and validation from the resources available to him; the textual is fashioned order to contribute to the fashioning of the (sexual) self. Coles illustrates, for me, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's portrayal in her introduction to *Novel Gazing* of the child whose "sense of personal queerness" is still unresolved, who reads "with only the patchiest familiarity" of the codes at work in the texts they consume, "where recognitions, pleasures and discoveries seep in only from the most stretched and ragged edges of one's competence" (3). Thinking with Coles has structured my analysis of my narrators' accounts of reading.

In the Introduction to this thesis, I limned my own memories of childhood reading; Shirley Hughes's Mrs MacNally's Maureen, Cynthia Voigt's Dicey Tillerman, Noel Streatfeild's Doctors Smith and Jakes. Asking my narrators to recall instances in which they may have 'queered' their own memories of reading in childhood and adolescence, I imagined they might respond with queer reading lists of their own making; of those characters they might have recognised as imbued with the "promise" Lee Lynch ascribes to Nancy Drew, for example, or of textual episodes they may have lingered over (39). Perhaps they, too, had been compelled by a certain homosocial or erotic frisson within a beloved childhood book that they were unable fully to articulate or comprehend at the time of reading. Perhaps it had stayed with them, coming gradually into focus in tandem with their increased understanding of their own LGBTQ identity, or becoming legible with a sudden, alarming clarity as they looked back at childhood reading from the vantage point of adulthood.

But of my ten narrators, questioned explicitly about their recollections of consciously 'queering' childhood and adolescent reading, only Amy remembered, in general terms, the experience of "reading against the grain", in which she had

"imagined" characters "to be more than they were"; reading, as she put it, "for something queer to be in there". As Carol put it, reading Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) provided her first fictional encounter with a "proper lesbian"; before that, she is adamant that she "didn't ascribe lesbian identities to characters who weren't necessarily out being lesbians": "you just had, it is how it is and how it looked was how it looked", she explains. For Mark, same-sex content of any description was outside the bounds not only of his personal reading history but of his conception of 'literature' itself. It sounds "stupid", he comments, "from where I'm sitting now", going on to explain that it was not until his English teacher introduced his secondary school class to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) that he became "aware that [...] in a kind of classic novel, or you know, a respected novel, a good novel, that you would find references to people being gay. To homosexuals as I would probably have thought of it at that time."

Further, eliciting reflections from my narrators on their use of specifically 'queer' reading strategies was less generative than anticipated. While my narrators carefully engaged with and considered my questions concerning those early memories of reading which might align to aspects of their LGBTQ identities – framed in my questioning, broadly and open-endedly, as their earliest recollections of a "queer [or gay, or lesbian] encounter with a book", however they might wish to interpret such a conjunction of the sexual and the textual – such memories proved unexpectedly elusive within the context of the oral history interview. Despite Amy's facility with the *concept* of queering her childhood reading, she struggles to find "cogent examples" of the kind of readerly strategies she outlines in her description of reading "against the grain": "they're all swimming around there but I can't quite pull them out". Her rather vague recollections do not map easily on to specific texts, or particular characters. There seems to be a "veil" between her "and all these things that [she] can't quite remember"; she "just can't bring them to mind". "I'm going to have to think about this", she offers.

"Strange", Eileen comments, when I put the same question to her; "[i]t's not something that's impressed me [...] at all." Kate is more confrontational: "What do you mean by that?", she asks me in return; she follows this with "Well, I suppose you could say" – there is a long pause – "I don't know how to answer that. Can we come back to that?".

This tantalising response suggests, as so often, that this line of questioning could be potentially fruitful; that my narrator is edging near to what "you could say", but remains on the verge of being able to put it into words, unable fully to divulge it (perhaps, even, to herself). As a researcher, this wariness or seeming difficulty on the part of my narrators to respond to this topic – in many ways, the primary motivation for the interview in the first place, both mine and theirs – immediately kindled my interest; my sense that I was travelling surprisingly near to a sensitive kernel of vital significance, in spite of, or because of, its refusal to emerge as easy anecdote or recollection. Instead, the connections between reading and queer selfhood revealed over the course of our conversations were consistently more fragile and more intricate. A little later in our conversation, Kate responds in much the same way as Amy: "I feel like I should be able to give you some examples, but I'm sort of racking my brains," she explains. After some hesitation, she suggests that it is the characters who "couldn't quite fit in" or "couldn't make sense of their own identity", those works with characters and scenes which were memorable or "stuck with" her for reasons that, in childhood, remained opaque, that she now casts as queer characters and queer texts.

"We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts", writes Rita Felski in *Uses of Literature* (2008), calling for "fine-grained descriptions of the affective attachments and cognitive reorientations that characterize the experience of reading a book" (11). Rather than rethinking the book in relation to the self, then, as Kate's example of returning to *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies* illustrates – by which I mean, reading into the book from an (LGBTQ) adult perspective – my focus here is on the various ways in which reading might enable the "process of rethinking

the self in relation to the book", in Meeker's phrase (27). In other words, bearing in mind Sedgwick's corrective, that "the queerness of a queer reading" remains unsettled, that it may not necessarily have to do with explicit "same-sex, interpersonal eroticism", what are some of the different reading strategies LGBTQ individuals use to explore aspects of their LGBTQ selfhood (*Novel Gazing* 2)? These ways of reading – structured around recognition, research and decoding – will now be explored in my narrators' accounts.

Reading as recognition

The notion of being hailed or interpellated through a (queer) reading experience, even the deployment of 'recognition' as a conceptual tool for understanding this relation between a reader and a text, is fairly well rehearsed. Louis Althusser's analogy uses 'hailing' as a way to explain the manner in which ideology claims and recruits individuals; in being addressed, as if by a shout in the street, and in recognising themselves as the subject of that address, individuals are thereby constituted *as* subjects (47-50). Relatedly, Valerie Rohy notes that one of the elements of queer reading is "interpellation by prevailing language"; the idea that reading about queerness might allow the individual to recognise and claim something of that queerness within and for themselves, as briefly explored above (105-106). Felski, too, writes of the reader who, "startled by the prescience of a certain combination of words" may find themselves "addressed, summoned, called to account" as they find "traces" of themselves in the pages they peruse (23). Felski points out that this process of recognition is mobilised perhaps most acutely for those readers who feel "estranged from or at odds" with their environment, who find affirmation in a text which seems to "rescue" them from invisibility (33). Turning to a discussion of lesbian readers' involvements with, somewhat predictably, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), she notes that "books will often function as lifelines for those deprived of other

forms of public acknowledgement" (43). Recognition is a process, therefore, with undoubted significance for the LGBTQ reader. But it is a little bewildering, reading Felski's elucidation of this process, to find scarce mention of the material book beyond a reference to the "marks on the page" (23). Felski describes the reader being "arrested by a compelling description"; a "flash of recognition leaps across the gap between text and reader"; the reader is "absorbed in scripts that confound their sense of who and what they are" (23). But what of the books that carry these "combination[s] of words" within them? In this first section, therefore, I explore how this process of 'recognising' the book that will speak to the reader's LGBTQ identity plays out in my narrators' and others' accounts, showing how it involves and interleaves with the visual and paratextual, as well as the textual.

In her 1988 essay grappling with the "endlessly fascinating questions" of "how it is and what it is that we 'read'", Hennegan recounts the following "brief and civilised altercation" between herself, then aged twelve, and her mother, during a shopping expedition in London (166). Hennegan, with five shillings to spend on a book of her choice, found herself drawn to one volume in particular, a "hideously bedizened" pulp paperback edition of a nineteenth-century French novel. She is unable to recall the exact title in question – it is either Daudet's *Sapho* (1884) or Zola's *Nana* (1880). Its cover artwork, however, made an altogether more vivid impression; one she has retained after more than a quarter of a century. With "shaky draughtsmanship and lurid colours", it was a "dashed off", anachronistic and "wildly inaccurate" depiction of a *fin de siècle* Parisian bar scene: "[u]nnaturally blonde, alarmingly dentifriced, two women sprawled across a table and each other, hair, eyes and teeth all straight off a 1950s pin-up calendar" (165). Based on cover alone – as she admits, "author and title signified nothing to me then" – the twelve-year-old Hennegan is immediately and stubbornly convinced that this particular paperback is the one she must purchase (166). Why, however, she is less certain. "[D]efiant but confused", she is

"[b]ewilder[ed] at the intensity" of her conviction that "*this* was the book I wanted" (165-6). Hennegan relates how her mother "gently, reasonably, worriedly and in the end, successfully" dissuaded her from the transaction, building her case around the very aesthetic that Hennegan found so peculiarly beguiling: "it didn't really look a very *nice* book, did it? The two women on the front looked … well … they didn't look … well … the whole *thing* looked rather … well … *sordid*, didn't I think?" (165).

These silences are telling. Here, Hennegan's mother is conveying another, unspoken message, buffered by ellipses, and stressed through the italics of "*nice"* and "*sordid*" – adjectives laden with connotations of respectability and (im)propriety. Namely, that a book cover illustrated according to the conventions of 1950s lesbian pulp fiction is self-evidently unsuitable reading material for a well brought up, aspirational middle class young girl, whose sexuality is both as yet unformed, and, paradoxically, heterosexual by default. Both Hennegan and her mother – the former intuitively, it seems, and the latter from a perhaps more informed, although radically divergent perspective – demonstrate a sophisticated visual literacy, correctly deciphering the popular codes of paperback mass-marketing. Two women together, portrayed in an intimate setting or pose, a certain sensuality suggested through "hair, eyes and teeth"; these motifs signal wordlessly to the prospective reader, suggestive of women's erotic excess, sexual transgressiveness, or even explicitly same-sex content. As Hennegan counters, however, both *Sapho* and *Nana* have entered the canon as classics of French literature: "just the thing, if a little precocious, for a twelve-year-old upwardly mobile grammar school girl with (at that time) Oxford ambitions" (165-6). "Had its cover been more restrained", she comments, "a tasteful green and white like the Penguin French Classics of the day, perhaps – I might have bought it with pleasure, profit and approval" (166). If indeed this had been the case, however, one might reasonably question whether Hennegan would have *wanted* the book at all? Would a "restrained" and "tasteful green and white" cover have induced such "powerful but

mixed emotions" (166)? Would she have been so intransigently certain that this book was "one of 'mine'", the "'right'" book for me", as she puts it (166)? Such questions go to the heart of this inquiry into the process of recognition that takes place between reader and book, with particular significance for the LGTBQ reader, as I will go on to explore.

Hennegan's mutinous stand-off with her mother took place in a central London newsagent's in 1960. Some three years earlier, another lesbian author, Katherine Forrest, had a striking encounter with a book in a drugstore in Detroit, Michigan, in the United States. A lesbian pulp paperback "appeared before [her] disbelieving eyes": "I did not need to look at the title for clues", she explains, "the cover leaped out at me from the drugstore rack" (ix). The then eighteen-year-old Forrest immediately bought the book – Ann Bannon's newly published 1957 pulp classic *Odd Girl Out* – identifying it at first glance, on the basis of cover alone, as "a book as necessary to me as air" (ix). "It opened the door to my soul", she breathlessly reveals, "and told me who I was" (ix). Similarly, Kath Weston reflects on her own "raid on a local college library" during which she "uncovered" a copy of Violette Leduc's 1966 "boarding school romance" *Therese et Isabelle* (259). Her use of the word "raid" emphasises again the swiftness and conviction with which she decided that this book was, to use Hennegan's term, the 'right' one – and something of the recklessness and danger with which the acquisition of the book was imbued. "Though it was untranslated and I knew no French", Weston explains, "the cognates were enough to make the case that this was the book for me" (259). Weston is frustratingly vague about the precise nature of these "cognates" – it could be the conjunction of two female names in the book's title, or else, perhaps, something implied by cover illustration or typography. So sure is Weston, however, that this is the book she has been waiting for, that the small matter of her actually being able to read and comprehend the text contained between its covers is glossed over almost entirely.

Covers that "leap […] out", books plundered on a "raid"; there is an immediacy to these encounters with books, something of the epiphanic about the speed with which reader and book commune. I am especially interested here in those readerly engagements with books that are categorised as "good" or "proper", or are *liked* by my narrators; in those that provoke a "curious, instant certainty of knowledge", as Hennegan defines it, or the "sudden flash of recognition sparked by a particular book" (166-68). This "flash of recognition", the "knowledge" exchanged in an "instant", is retrospectively parsed as a mutually constructing or transformative encounter. It seems to reveal not only something about the book in question, but about its reader. Hennegan writes about recognising a book as "one of mine"; for Forrest, a book – as yet unread – "told me who I was"; Weston identifies at a glance "the book for me". In this way, queer recognition of paratextual content is mirrored by a recognition of queer subjectivity on the part of the reader.

Undoubtedly, Coles, Hennegan, Forrest and Weston are all interpellated by the material text and its paratexts – by cover, title, typography, illustration, and other "materialized message[s]" about the work in question which surround and are bound into the book, to use Gérard Genette's formulation ("Introduction to the Paratext" 263-4). The "effect of the paratext", as Genette puts it in his book-length study, *Paratexts*, "lies very often in the realm of influence – indeed, manipulation – experienced subconsciously" (409). Theorising these "accompanying productions", Genette proposes that each paratextual element has a certain "*illocutionary force"* (emphasis in original), communicating a message to its reader with varying degrees of didacticism or discretion (10-11). A work's paratextual elements are essential to its "influence on the public"; indeed, to its entire reception *as* a book, and its ability to be recognised as such (1-2). Paratextual engagement is a key element of any reader's experiences-with-books and reading, and one often foregrounded in memories of reading in childhood and adolescence. Graham Greene, for example, remembers "distinctly the suddenness

with which a key turned in a lock and I found I could read" – not just "a reading book", for the very young or emergent reader, but "a real book", "paper-covered" (13). Rather than recalling the specificities of episode or character, dialogue or plot, Greene goes on to detail the high drama of its dust jacket illustration, a "picture of a boy, bound and gagged, dangling at the end of a rope inside a well with the water rising above his waist" (13). The book is remembered for its appearance and its paper cover, rather than for its language, style, length or complexity. Early memories of reading are, indeed, commonly shaped, textured, coloured and keenly *felt*; a composite of material qualities and paratextual cues, and the powerful affective pull they retain. Interviews carried out as part of the Memories of Fiction project corroborate this; Sandra Newnham, for example, is unable to recall the content of a beloved childhood book, but "can remember it was one of those that had hard covers". "I can feel it in my hand", she tells interviewer Shelley Trower, "those board covers" ("An Oral History of Reading" n. pag.).

For my narrators, too, this is demonstrably the case. Mary, for example, tells me that the "proper *Little Women* is with a red cover. Red hardback faded cover." Her current edition, a "blue cover that's very faded on the spine, and all sorts of decoration all over it" is an edition purchased by her grandmother in adulthood, a "cuckoo in the nest" which she is consciously "becoming fond of" and "feel[ing] kinder towards", despite its not being the "proper" colour. Kate is upfront about her strategies for selecting reading material in childhood: "I would […] choose the one with the best cover", she explains, "I would generally choose ones with animals on the cover if they didn't have any *Secret Seven* books". "Even later on", she admits – into adolescence – "I think I was probably swayed by the cover and the appearance". "[E]mbarrassed" to read the newer edition of *The Diddakoi* she purchased from Amazon for the purposes of our second interview in public, Kate is "really disappointed, because it's really ugly […] they've redesigned the cover […] it just looks very twee." Julia recalls "nosing

around the library and pulling things off the shelves, and looking at the cover and thinking, oh, that looks interesting, I'll read this." Alice also chooses "from the cover. And the title." Her decision-making process is less transparent than Kate's Enid Blyton/animal hierarchy, intuitive rather than explicit; she categorises covers and titles into "good" and "bad", much as Mary has a "proper" and an improper cover for *Little Women* (1868). "You could show me book covers now and I could say good/bad. I'm sure," Alice asserts, although, "I still wouldn't be able to tell you necessarily why I thought that." Colour and typeface are possible influences: Alice admits to wanting "swirly writing", signalling her desire for books stereotypically marketed towards women. Amy's reading of typography and motif makes a more straightforward link between cover and contents. Commenting wryly that, as a result of her partner's preferred reading matter, "we've got a lot of books in our house that have a certain type of calligraphy-style title, with lotus flowers behind them", she gently mocks the genres and themes these design choices imply. Her partner, Amy explains, likes reading "books that follow a family over several generations", about "the goings-on of a bunch of people over a long hot sultry summer in which many things are disclosed", or books set in "Dynasty China" or "Ancient Japan" that "follow the fortunes of some family for about a thousand years" – "which," Amy adds, "I do not like at all."

Image-as-paratext also inflects the reading experience, in both negative and positive ways. Finding an illustration in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) so horrifying that it seemed to imbue the very object of the book with a malignity, Amy "threw the book away" and had to "run past the book" on the shelf "for ages afterwards". Whereas Andy found it "really frustrating" to read books "where illustration got in the way of the text […] and lots of children's books were like that", for Mark, the line drawings included in Ronald Welch's *The Gauntlet* (1951) help to concretise the perceived intangibility of the ebook edition into "feel[ing] more like […] the original […] book" that he read in childhood. Illustrations mediate between "original" book and electronic

text, connecting them in terms of their content but also in terms of the reader's affective response across editions. "I was quite surprised when I started reading it on the Kindle that exactly the same line drawings were part of the text", Mark explains, "I was really pleased to see the drawings were there".

I turn now to another example where "illustration got in the way of the text", this time in relation to 'reading' in-text illustration. Rather than a comment on the *mise-en-page*, the following example exposes a clash between the interpretation of text and of image. Kate, asked about characters or episodes in childhood reading that she particularly liked or felt an affinity with, responds by reflecting on the *Jill* series, nine pony stories by Ruby Ferguson published between 1949 and 1962. Kate comments that she "felt that there were some sort of parallels" between her own child-self and the character of Jill: while reading, "I was thinking about myself in relation to her." It is not, however, a straightforward identification, but a more complicated matter of comparison and discrepancy; misrecognition rather than recognition, or recognition gone awry. "She was a kind of aspirational figure", Kate explains – largely due to her status as a *bona fide* pony-owner ("she had a horse, or actually she had two") – "but her life was completely different to mine". "Keen on horses" as a child, Kate "was continually saying 'When can I have a pony?'", she tells me. "[M]y dad told me I could have one when I was eleven, and then when I got to eleven I didn't get my pony, and that was just a taste of life's disappointment". The relationship between herself and the character of Jill was one based on "continually seeing the dissimilarities rather than the similarities," Kate suggests. Nowhere does this disjunct make itself more felt than in Kate's reading of the book's illustrations.

Asked to say more about the ways in which she thought about herself *in relation to* the character of Jill, Kate immediately homes in on issues of gender performativity, explaining that:

> one of the things I liked about her or felt connected me to her in some way, is that she wasn't girly in the way that she talked about her own appearance, and she was very scathing about girls who were into pretty dresses, and kind of, thinking about their appearance too much and trying to kind of effect a certain kind of femininity […] when she had to make herself presentable, it would always just be about putting on a clean pair of jodphurs, and, you know, her best riding hat or something, and dragging a comb through her hair.

It is a "reluctant attention to her appearance when it was made necessary", Kate continues. Jill has a "no-nonsense" approach to matters of (human) grooming; she "never talked about what she herself looked like, as far as I'm aware, except […] perhaps in slightly kind of derogatory terms, so she would say that she […] looked in the mirror and she looked a mess". Indeed, attention to the primary text reveals that Jill is self-deprecatory about her own appearance, unless describing her riding outfits – "I got up and put on my gingham school dress and some pretty-far-gone gym shoes, and tried not to think of my beloved riding clothes hanging spruce and brushed in the cupboard" (13) – and disparaging about others' attention to their own: "[Cecilia] walked about in front of the long glass in Mummy's room until I felt sick" (93).

However, Kate experienced a jarring "disconnect between what I read and what I saw" in the book's illustrations, "specifically in terms of femininity, in terms of gender". "[W]hen you're a child and you read, pictures are quite important, and you pay a lot of attention to them", Kate notes. The editions she read had "pen-and-ink illustrations of Jill and her friends and her horses", she goes on, but these visual depictions "took her completely away from […] any kind of affinity or kind of similarity I felt with her". This illustrator, humorously enough, given Kate's more extensive reflections on one particular in-text illustration, above – the "S&M lesbian sex scene, drawn from a very male perspective" with which this chapter opens – is identified on the frontispiece of several *Jill* books only as Caney. This is Clifford Caney, illustrator of, among other titles for children, RM Ballantyne's *Silver Lake* in the Clifford Lewis & Co edition (1950), and Gaye Knowles's *The Islanders' Strange Holiday* (1960). Kate

correctly identifies him as male, and, as she observes, he was working "in the late sixties or even earlier", more than a decade, or even two, before Kate's engagement with the series. Working in a particular, stylised tradition familiar to readers of books for girls in the immediate post-war period, Caney made a series of aesthetic decisions which positioned Jill entirely and disturbingly "at odds with the character as I read her", Kate explains. "Sexualised […] and semi-adult and kind of feminine", "recognisably teenage", the illustrated Jill:

> had the figure that was fashionable at that time, when those kind of illustrations were produced, so she was quite curvy, and she always seemed to be wearing lipstick, or else her lips were quite, sort of, prominent in the illustrations, and she had a plait. She had long hair in a plait.

For Kate, the awareness of "a kind of mismatch" between the gendered and "un-sexual, desexualised" ways in which she encountered the character in the text and in the "sexually objectifying" illustrations, proved a significant stumbling block. "I remember struggling to reconcile the one with the other", she explains, "I thought it was wrong. I thought the illustrator had got it wrong." During the course of our conversation, Kate brings text, illustration and her own 'reading' or putative "mental image" of the character – "definitely nothing to do with lipstick, or breasts" – into productive conjunction. Textually speaking, as a first-person narrator, Jill has, Kate points out, "a very kind of definite sort of voice and agency, and a kind of subjectivity". She is dry, humorous, unsentimental. "I was sitting on a pile of gravel outside a field gate feeling absolutely browned off" (9); "I gave an awful gulp, like an expiring cow" (13). She is also resolutely uninterested in stereotypically 'feminine' pursuits: "there were lovely papers lying about, like *Horse and Hound* and *Riding,* not the dreary magazines you find in most people's houses, all about knitting and love and how to make puddings" (15). The "tension" Kate identifies between text and image threatens this: the character is "objectified", the illustrations "positioned her as a certain kind of female, a certain kind of girl". Further, Kate then slightly shifts this constellation, to

include "how I saw this person in the text, and what this illustration was" *and* "how I saw myself". "There was", she says, "this sort of weird triangular relationship between the three":

> I was learning what gender identity was all about and I think I was starting to be confused and uncertain about my place in it, so maybe that was part of that confusion. A kind of awareness of the gap between what is supposed to be, or what is stereotypical or desirable, and on the other hand what I imagined her to be like in my head.

As our conversation continues, Kate weaves in threads from her earlier observations about Jill as a character against whom she measured herself or into whose multiple representations – in textual and pictorial terms – she attempted to inscribe her own formative ideas of herself as a gendered and sexual individual, a kind of palimpsest of the "stereotypical", the "desirable", Jill as she "imagined her to be like" and her own "confused and uncertain" position amid the two. "I didn't have enough sense of gender and sexuality," she explains, "I didn't have enough sense of what belonged where, and how things were supposed to work. Reading books like that was a way of learning about it [gender and sexuality] and making sense of it".

Paratexts here begin to inform what Angus Brown refers to as the "intricate and intuitive process of queer recognition" ("The Touch of Reading" 29). However, there are further iterations of this *recognising* in which other paratextual markers come into play. "I'd look at the blurb, I'd look at the title, I'd look at the foreword," Andy explains, elaborating on his approach to choosing new reading material. Reading each carefully, he is engaging also with the constituent *parts* of the book: front cover, back cover, spine, endpapers, title page, prefatory material. Kate tells me that as a teenage reader, she "internalised some idea of the canon", realising "that there was certain books you were supposed to read, and others that you weren't." She "knew" that "the Penguin Classic books with the black spine […] were supposed to be the ones that you read." The "black spine" acts as a visual key to identifying and unlocking a level of cultural privilege or prestige, marking out which books, of all those available, "you

were supposed to read." For Mary, the shared interest in reading and in feminist politics amongst her adolescent friendship group was symbolised by Virago's "dark-green spined classics" and "the Women's Press books with the black and white stripy spines". The "visual thing", she comments, "matters to me". As a teenager and young adult, Mary considered herself to have a "kind of theoretical interest" in fiction featuring lesbian characters, rather than "a more personal interest": "it was only when I was older, in my twenties, that I was like, god's sake. You know. Get real here. This is why you're interested in it, it's personal for you, do you know what I mean." Of her first encounter with Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), however – which she read at this point of transition from the theoretical to the personal – she comments "although, it is a Virago, isn't it, so." Her psychic shelving of Hall's novel alongside the Virago classics she had read some years previously suggests that something of its relevance or familiarity is transmitted partly through what she was able to pick up from its paratexts, as well as what its body text was more explicitly communicating.

To situate Mary's experience alongside other memories of experiences-with-books shared by both feminist and lesbian readers, Lucy Delap notes the "comforting material presence […] conveyed sensorially", for feminist activists in the 1970s, of the "deep green covers of Virago Classics" (171). Virago, suggests Delap, contributed to the "solidarities" generated by a specifically feminist print culture, not only through the ideas contained and catalysed by these classic texts, but by their very solidity, their materiality (171). Delap cites Philippa Harrison, a feminist bookseller, who recalls "a mutual female pleasure in seeing those spinners of green books in a bookshop", a framing which hints at the beguiling proximities between a feminist political camaraderie – the "mutual[ity]" Harrison mentions – and a female same-sex sexuality: these books deliver a sensual, "mutual […] pleasure" both between book and reader, and between communities of readers who respond similarly to their paratextual codings (171). O'Rourke, in her survey of lesbian reading histories, quotes one reader

who reflects perceptively on the influence of paratextual framing on the reading experience. "'I read it twice'", O'Rourke's interviewee states. "'Once about 10 years ago after I'd accepted my sexuality, when I found it essentially negative and depressive, and much more recently in the Virago edition, where I found Alison Hennegan's introduction very useful and interesting'" (124). O'Rourke notes, moreover, that "[a] number of women said they would *only recommend the Virago edition* and would advise that *the introduction be read first*" (my emphasis) (128). Mary is making a perhaps tongue-in-cheek suggestion, that her earlier interest in the Virago "dark green-spined classics" has led her, inexorably, to *The Well of Loneliness*, that classic of lesbian literature. At the same time, it is a kind of conscious, retroactive construction, that there is a certain kind of narrative sense to be made from remembering how an interest in feminist politics shaded into a theoretical, and then more practical, interest in lesbian politics and lesbian desire; how a desire for books which looked a certain way, as a kind of code for reflecting such thematic interests, could operate on a similar continuum, leading their reader from feminism to lesbianism, their fictional concerns mirroring the reader's more practical preoccupations.

Again, these readerly strategies – this time clustered more around branding, titles, publishers and authors than cover artwork or illustrations, specifically – suggest an added dimension introduced by issues of sexuality and gender identity which mark this reading practice out as distinct and especially meaningful for the LGBTQ reader. "You start doing all that stuff", Amy explains, chattily – "that stuff", as if it is a common practice, requiring little explanation or justification – "where you look at the author's picture, and the blurb, and the cover, other things by the author and other things by the publishing house". Philip Kennicott similarly writes of the intertextual "threads of connection" between books, which came "from the introductions, afterwords, footnotes, and the solicitations to buy other books found just inside the back cover" (n. pag.). These "little précis", he explains, were themselves "a guide to the coded language

– 'illicit, corruption, hedonism' – that often, though not infallibly, led to other enticing books" (n. pag.). Lynch records the significance of titles and cover copy (as opposed to illustration), again alert to specific, evocative terms and resonant conjunctions: "[t]itles like *Queer Patterns*, *The Evil Friendship,* and *The Sex Between* were instant signals of gay books" (40). Their "ludicrous and blatantly sensational cover copy", she writes, "were both my signals and my shame" (43). Like Kennicott, Hennegan isolates "a particular publisher's colophon", "chapter headings", "an author's photograph or coded biographical note", "the identity of a series editor", "the cumulative effect of a writer's previous publications listed in the front" (167).

This attention to covers, titles, publisher's details and other paratextual information – although close-read in three different examples in this chapter so far, in relation to Kate, Coles and Hennegan – might seem initially surprising. 'Don't judge a book by its cover' is, after all, a basic tenet of reading. To make such a judgement is a kind of idiomatic shorthand for the unsophisticated, the cursory or blinkered; it can be applied not only to an encounter with a text, but also a person, or a social situation. Readers are warned against jumping to hasty conclusions based on first impressions; against considering cover before content, surface rather than depth. For the queer reader, however, making decisions about a book's significance on the basis of its paratexts can, on the contrary, be a perversely necessary reading strategy. As Ann Bannon writes in her Foreword to Jayne Zimet's collection of lesbian pulp fiction cover art, the "almost comical disconnect between the covers and their contents" – designed to titillate a predominantly male audience – meant that lesbian readers learned to "recognize […] a nascent literature of their own by reading the covers ironically": "we knew how to find them", she explains, "and how to read them" (10-15). This "comical disconnect" and method of "reading ironically" is allied to that displayed by Kate in her discussion of *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies*. While often characterised as impulsive, intuitive or inexplicable, this reading is no less attentive, skillful or layered than a rigorous

engagement with the main body of a text. Forrest reading Bannon, Hennegan reading Daudet or Zola, Kate reading Caney's drawings, and Mary reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in the Virago edition, to take just two examples from my narrators profiled above, can be usefully grouped together, therefore, as reading practices which are *of a kind*. What's more, reading paratexts in this way parallels to an extent the kinds of interpretive decisions – charged, nuanced, attuned, often rapid – that the queer reader might make interpersonally and socially, in the wider world beyond the book.

(Close) reading as research

Extending from and woven with this instinctual, visual mode of reading, concerned with the surfaces of the book and its paratexts, is a more systematic, accretive mode of 'reading as research'. Nina, interviewed by Amy Tooth Murphy as part of her own doctoral project, describes a reading "'process of following up threads'", her version of Kennicott's "threads of connection", mentioned above (211). Nina outlines how, after reading a DH Lawrence novel, her reading horizons opened out: "'somewhere in the critiques or the, the, y'know, introductions, Katherine Mansfield would have been mentioned, so I followed that up. And I think she was married to a chap who was a publisher. So I started reading his books'" (211). This was, for Nina, a strategy specifically adopted as a way to find out more about lesbian lives. As she put it, "'at that time certainly for me, there wouldn't have been any way of going and saying, "I want to read about this subject"'"; this reading practice was developed as a direct consequence of the occlusion of same-sex desire in Nina's everyday life (211). I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis some of the ways in which LGBTQ readers use books and reading to learn about non-normative sexualities and gender identities; books as resources and repositories of information and knowledge impossible to access by other means. According to this model, queer readers seek out reading material – both fiction and reference books – as sources of information, with the aim of extracting relevant

information about viable queer lifestyles or identities. I now show how this way of reading plays out in my narrators' accounts.

Marginalia is often taken as valuable evidence of reading, providing traces of the reader in the book – their comments, observations, feelings, likes and dislikes, details of reading order or guides to their reading histories, the books read and unread – which are otherwise difficult to postulate or reconstruct. My narrators were often attentive and careful readers, marking up their books with marginalia of various kinds. "I annotate a lot of my books, I make comments, I underline", Andy explains: "interacting with the books was quite important to me". He still has "three volumes" of commonplace notebooks, into which he would "copy quotations that particularly struck" him; he "wanted to be aware of them when the book went back to the library". Eileen, too, would "mark certain passages as I went through". It is a reading strategy she has carried forward into adulthood. Rereading *Little Women*, she explains that this "is how I tried to go back and tried to pick out those phrases which were very meaningful to me as a young person", inscribing the novel with a layered commentary which juxtaposes remembered past readings with present readings, and the recalled reading self with the current. Mary, reflecting on Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School* series for our second conversation, recalls how she became "kind of obsessed", as a child, with "trying to read them from the beginning". In rereading her childhood copy of the *Jo of the Chalet School* (1926), she was confronted with tangible material evidence of her reading child-self:

> I was looking at it the other day, and I saw I had little ticks in the front, in the list of books, it shows which ones you've got. I'm sure I only ever read actually maybe about half, if that, of what was published.

In researching queer reading, however, it becomes clear that some of the most intense relations between reader and book are manifest in a parallel set of behaviours which remain largely invisible, coming to light primarily through anecdotal, autobiographical and oral historical accounts.

"I used dictionaries a lot, if I couldn't find a word, I'd use a dictionary", Andy tells me. Even now, he likes "to be able to reference stuff, so when I make quotes I like to get them right, I like to know where something comes from." He is a rigorous reader, using books as a resource and repository of information: "I don't like to point someone in the direction of a book and them to find something that's different to what I said they were going to find", he explains. In this context, the following reading memory is a compelling account of the books' – and words' – power both to define and unsettle:

> I remember once, and I can't have been older than eight because I remember the house we were living in at the time, [...] I was reading a science fiction novel, and Asimov used the word hetero, heterogeneous. And I said to my parents, what does heterogeneous mean. Ooh, they said, I don't know. And maybe they were telling the truth, maybe they didn't know. So I said, oh, that's okay, I'll look it up, and the dictionary was always there [...] in the bookshelf. We got it out to look up words and so, I'll look it up. And I just have the slight recollection of the slight nervousness on my parents' face, maybe they thought I'd said heterosexual, that was what I was looking for. I found heterogeneous and read out of the dictionary, "comprised of many different varying elements", and I learned what I wanted to know. [...] I can almost recollect – whether it's true or not – a kind of sigh of relief on their part, 'oh, it's an innocent word after all'.

This recollection of using the dictionary is an episode defined by lack, absence, reversal: of what Andy wasn't looking up, what it didn't mean, and what he didn't find – and about what neither he nor his parents' consciously understood to be taking place. It stays present in his memory for something it articulates about his ability to acknowledge and openly inhabit his sexuality, and his parents' ability to receive that information. In later adolescence, Andy recalls, his sexuality occupied a similar liminal position within his family structure, signalled but not acknowledged, and mediated through the textual:

> I remember when I was about fifteen I started getting gay, *Gay Times*, was it *Gay Times*, or *Gay News*. *Gay News* I think it was. Delivered at home, and I was sort of reading it at home and leaving it around, and nobody said a word. It was like I'd done it but no-one talked about it. And I was okay with that, I felt, that, that's what I wanted to achieve. I didn't want to be valued for having a sexual orientation, I wanted it to be known that that's what I had, and that was it.

Andy's memory of looking up "heterogeneous" is an arresting mirror of another account of reading captured by Kath Weston. As part of her research into gay migration from rural to urban centres in twentieth-century America, Weston interviewed Vince Mancino, a gay Italian-American man from a working-class family, born in 1955. Mancino relates how he "took the book and brought it into my room and [...] *hid* the dictionary". Mancino correlates his need to conceal the book itself with the need to keep his sexuality a secret. Weston identifies this as "a recognition scene that presupposes 'the homosexual' as a kind of person", an astute comment on the repeated motifs of the codified coming-out narrative, and its role in reinforcing assumptions around the existence of an implicit, stable and latent gay identity, waiting to be revealed (258). It was, Mancino explains "as if I had always known the definition; now I knew the term" (258). The concept of having "always known", at an instinctive or unarticulated level, what is meant by 'homosexuality', what it is to feel same-sex desire or live a 'homosexual' life (however that might be defined), points to the complex temporalities of queer self-knowledge, often activated in accounts of reading, as I will explore further in Chapter Four. Here, I argue, this putting-into-words of repressed or concealed sexuality is a specifically queer component of an aspect of the reading experience more generally, what Wolfgang Iser refers to – in language incidentally but peculiarly reminiscent of 1950s lesbian pulp – as the capacity of reading to bring to light "a layer of the reader's personality" which "had hitherto remained hidden in the shadows"; the text does not signify purely according to meaning contained within it alone, but "that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us" (157). For Mancino, there is something dangerously revealing about the circulation of the word "homosexuality" in print; "it was as if", he says, "I had been found out" (258).

These last examples – using honed reading skills to define and stabilise selfhood – are a feature of several lesbian histories - which are so often, histories of reading. There is a peculiarly dizzying, Alice-in-Wonderland effect contained within

these accounts of finding and locating the defining term which will explain a whole orientation, existence and life, and alter so profoundly a reader's positioning in, and to, the world. Reading reduced to seven letters, singularly arranged, which recalibrate entire selves. Sandy Kern, on hearing the word 'lesbian' for the first time, "ran to the library […] the very next day":

> and I looked up the word *lesbian* and I felt so proud of myself because it talked about the Isle of Lesbos and it mentioned something about Radclyffe Hall, who wrote something called *The Well of Loneliness*, which I took out that very same day and read and reread and reread. (56)

Kern begins a research process which progresses conscientiously from key search term to key text, establishing links between these texts and invoking queer (literary) forebears from Sappho to Stephen Gordon. For Kern, then, lesbianism is a life-path in which her role-models exist in parallel, textual form, as authors and as characters. Shortly after first hearing the term 'lesbian', another reader, Doris Lunden, refers in an oral history gathered by Elly Bulkin to carrying out, "the research that I think has been done by so many lesbians throughout history" (110). Joanna Russ, introducing a bibliography of works on alternative sexuality in science fiction, fantasy and horror published in 1990, expresses her fervent wish that it had been available to her sixteen year old self. Russ comments on the paucity of her own "literary-cultural education on the subject of lesbianism": she "had done a lot of very frustrating research" (xiii). "[W]hen, at nineteen,", the cartoonist and graphic novelist Alison Bechdel "realized she was a lesbian," writes Valerie Rohy, "that revelation launched a research project" (104).

For Bechdel, Russ, Lunden and Kern, so too for my narrator Amy. "When I decided that I was a lesbian", Amy tells me, "I wanted to read about other lesbians, and women and all these kind of things, that I thought would somehow reveal more about lesbianism and women's relationships to me." What follows is in-depth analysis of Amy's reading of *A Village Affair* – that "hothouse weird domestic saga", as Amy

describes it – a 1989 novel by Joanna Trollope. Amy purchased her brand-new copy of the book in 1995, aged around fourteen, and shelved it immediately in her material and psychic collection, her "archive of me", in her own memorable phrase. "[B]ought it, read it, and I've kept it ever since", she states simply. I touch on the book's significance as a material object in the previous chapter. I turn now to the textual, considering the ways in which *A Village Affair* enabled Amy to undertake a lesbian research project of her own.

"I've got a couple of books that I just bought […] because they were about lesbians", admits Amy. *A Village Affair* is one such book. Amy bought Trollope's novel solely for the promise of lesbian content, after the *Sun* newspaper ran an article trailing its 1995 television adaptation as a "prime time rude thing", as Amy puts it, complete with "a double-page spread showing bare boobs". As popular, middlebrow, women's fiction, *A Village Affair* might at first glance appear marginal to Amy's reading interests at fourteen, both in terms of genre – at that age, she read mostly science fiction and the popular *Point Horror* series – but also in terms of Trollope's expected demographic, or implied reader. "My reading really is quite male in a sense", Amy explains:

> I've never done, like *Pippi Longstocking*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Pollyanna*, never done any of that stuff. *Little Women,* you know […] I never read anything like *The Babysitter* [sic] *Club* […] Never read *Sweet Valley High* […] these were all girls' books and I just wasn't interested.

A Village Affair may, therefore, seem an unexpected repository for such a strong emotional (and, as previously discussed, physical) attachment. However, the same-sex relationship between the two women at the heart of the story (the 'affair' of the title) ensured its immediate and continuing significance to Amy's teenage self. The novel's central protagonist, Alice Jordan, is a young mother of three in her late twenties, married to Martin, a country solicitor, who moves with her family to a small Cotswolds village. There, she falls in love with and embarks on an ill-judged relationship with Clodagh Unwin, daughter of the local gentry, and, "massive inverted commas for the

sake of the recorder", in Amy's words, "a 'proper lesbian'". Following the predictable narrative trajectory for lesbian relationships as depicted in popular media – "of course", Amy says, "it was a lesbian cliché" – the relationship between Alice and Clodagh is discovered, to widespread shock and disapproval, Alice's marriage and extended family relationships disintegrate, as does her relationship with Clodagh, and she is shunned by the close-knit village community, eventually leaving with her children to begin an independent new life, alone.

"I certainly had never read a Joanna Trollope", Amy comments drily, "and have never read one since". What I infer from Amy's statement, and tone, is mild surprise, and not a little embarrassment, at having been hailed as a young, queer, Scottish teenager, with working class parents, by a novel so squarely aimed at a middle-class, middle-aged, Middle England readership; moreover, one which presents its central relationship as deviant, unnatural and ultimately doomed. "What a world," Amy says later, of the novel. "You know [...] if that's bloody middle England, you can keep it. Like, what a horrible place. What a bunch of sanctimonious, self-righteous busybodies." Yet in bringing up *A Village Affair*, Amy sparks a wholly unexpected moment of intersubjective intimacy within the interview. I, too, read Trollope's novel, at around the same time as Amy – we are close in age – and I shared her surprise, embarrassment, and also her admiration for and attachment to it.

Something of the intensity of Amy's adolescent engagement with the novel is transmitted during our first conversation by her urgent explanation of her first encounter with it; she speaks fluently, in long, detailed, multi-claused sentences:

> There was a programme on television which was an adaptation of a Joanna Trollope novel, of all things, and I've certainly only read one Joanna Trollope novel, and it's called *A Village Affair*, and it was on television and it starred Sophie Ward and Kerry Fox, and…

In our second conversation, this is further borne out by the immediacy and accuracy of her recall of the novel. She is "amazed by certain bits", that she "remembered them so

well"; the accuracy is unexpected, and is activated in (re)reading. "I could never have quoted to you, before I read it", she explains, "but as I was reading along, it was kind of, almost how you might recognise a rhythm. I just was like, back on that rhythm of reading." Her description is of an almost learned-by-heart, rote engagement with the text which brings to mind the scholars of the nineteenth century schoolroom. This "store", as Amy puts it, of aspects of the plot, setting and characterisation, is something that is "very present" in her memory, and something that she can "access […] quite quickly". Each example is connected to the relationship between Alice and Clodagh. She was "vividly imagining" this relationship, its dynamics, its practicalities: "I just pored over it, to just try to understand, to absorb, to live that, you know." She attempts to "understand", to "think", to "absorb"; an approach which again emphasises the pedagogical, cognitive and academic. Here, Amy deploys the kind of careful, considered engagement with a text that seems analogous to that attempted by the historian "por[ing] over" a primary source, aiming to attune to or to recreate a particular historical moment: her aim is to discover "what did these two people feel, and what must it have been like".

Filleting the text for the richest material, Amy behaves much as an archival researcher might, sifting through boxes and files to assemble and flesh out a skeletal, barely-glimpsed or oblique historical narrative. In fact, Amy literalises this metaphor very concretely, recollecting her documenting and archiving of artefacts relating to *A Village Affair* in order to create a kind of meta-narrative about the text, rooting the book itself within a media ecology which encompasses also the television adaptation, coverage in print media of its screening, and profiles of its leading actors. Here she refers back to her early encounters with the novel, during which a mention in the *Sun* newspaper of the actors who played the main protagonists led her to the *Radio Times* magazine:

> Kerry Fox [who plays Clodagh in the television drama] was interviewed in the *Radio Times* a little while after that. They used to have a back page that was an interview with somebody and I tore that out and kept it in my room. Um, I had like a desk drawer and I kept all kinds of stuff like that in there.

Later, she tells me, "I had a crush on Kerry Fox, after this, for a long time", going into some detail concerning Fox's pose and clothing in the photograph accompanying the aforementioned magazine article. This "back page" was repurposed as "a poster of her on my wall, which wasn't actually a poster as it was a page out of the *Radio Times* where she was interviewed". It is an intriguing paper trail of Amy's fascination with the novel, in all its proliferations and media formats, including a slippage into the off-screen lives of the actors who starred in its adaptation. She continues:

> And I was kind of fascinated with her [Kerry Fox] for a while, and I was like, I wonder if she's a lesbian in real life, she's got short hair, she must be, and then lo and behold it turned out that it was Sophie Ward who was a lesbian in real life, erm, which you know I did not expect […] that was at the point in my life where I was starting to be challenged on my stereotypes.

(In a peculiar case of life mirroring art, the actor Sophie Ward, who plays the character of Alice in the television adaptation, was – like Alice – in a heterosexual marriage with small children, and living in a Gloucestershire village, when she met and fell in love with a woman. She divorced her husband in 1996, shortly after *A Village Affair* aired on television and came out publically as a lesbian, giving candid interviews to various newspapers and to BBC 2's *Gaytime TV* talkshow ("Episode 2.5" 1996)). Again, I suggest here that Amy is taking a kind of historian's approach, collating and comparing primary and secondary sources to build up a fuller picture of *A Village Affair* in all its various significations, mining this data for what it can tell her about being, as she puts it, "a lesbian in real life". For Amy, the characters of Alice and Clodagh operate as representatives of a culture or a society that she is able to learn about most effectively through books and reading.

Rebecca O'Rourke, in her extensive study of lesbian readers of *The Well of Loneliness*, comments that "books and reading are to lesbians, often the only public

discourse about lesbianism to which there is access" (141). As a consequence, O'Rourke suggests that:

> As lesbian readers, our skills in reading generally – which are developed through years of reading against the grain of heterosexual culture – take on a new dimension, which is to extract from apparently unpromising texts, lessons of inspiration and encouragement for lesbian lives. (141)

A peculiarly specific literary-critical skill set is attributed, throughout lesbian literary-critical discourse, to the ordinary lay reader, by virtue of her sexuality, her desire for representation, and her demand for knowledge and information about same-sex relationships. The lesbian reader, according to Sally Munt in her introduction to *New Lesbian Criticism*, possesses a certain "literary competence" and works with a set of "interpretive conventions" (xxi). To appropriate a critical technique from another discipline, then, Amy is close-reading *A Village Affair*.

"First, you must make an early start on reading the material, many times," runs an advisory paper on practical criticism for undergraduates at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University; then, "[b]rood on what you read" (Prynne 3). Amy describes her teenage reading and rereading of Trollope's novel; she read it "many times in a very short space of time". "I was quite obsessed with it", she tells me in our first conversation, a sentiment she returns to in our second: "I was a little bit obsessed with that book for a while". More specifically, "I read the same passages over and over and over again", she explains; "the same bits". This excerpting of the text into "passages" or "bits" for repeated close inspection brings to mind the seminar room or the examination paper; a kind of practical criticism exercise in which an extract from a larger work is scrutinised for such elements as style, tone, purpose and form, and from such localised effects, an argument extrapolated regarding the design of the larger work, its overall purpose and structure.

This impression is heightened by Amy's later reflection, in our second conversation, that she is, in fact, reconstructing the relationship between Alice and

Clodagh through what amount to "fairly brief interactions" between the two women. "It's meant to be a book all about their relationship", she comments, but "if you were to add up the number of pages where it's just those two together having any kind of relationship on an intimate level, it's actually quite fleeting". *A Village Affair* is, Amy points out, a "two hundred and seventy page book", but "[y]ou can probably find ten pages where it's just them". It is to these "ten pages" that Amy pays most attention. "Probably if I read it back now", Amy says, "I mean nothing really, there's no lesbian content really hardly at all". As a consequence, all information pertaining to both the "physical" and the "deep emotional relationship between these two women" present within the text is forced to yield greater dividends than it can perhaps afford. This elucidation of close reading invites a closer look at the term 'close', reading it in terms of intimacy as well as meticulousness; it is a practice strongly reminiscent of the "formalism [...] at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme" with which Sedgwick attended to those "texts that magnetized" her and from which she "struggled to wrest meaning" (*Tendencies* 3-4). Driven by her desire to find and find out about lesbianism, then, Amy, like Sedgwick, exemplifies another reading practice, one more commonly associated with literary scholarship. Perhaps "close reading", as Angus Brown writes in his unpublished doctoral thesis, "has always been a little queer" (215).

JH Prynne's close-reading advice for undergraduates is to read "the material, many times, exploring all the features you can see or half-glimpse so as to bring them to explicit consciousness" (3). As demonstrated, Amy read and reread her selected passages "many times". In these textual encounters and in her wider reading more generally, Amy began to explore those features she could "see or half-glimpse"; that "may be latent behind or beneath appearances or only obliquely expressed by surface features" (3-4). Here, reiterating my earlier point that these modes of reading are often

overlapping and intermingled, close-reading shades into the third way of reading I explore in this chapter: reading as decoding.

Sleuthing and decoding

Lee Lynch, in her essay "Cruising the Libraries", anatomises the "subtle, frustrating, and exciting" reading strategy she honed as a "kid with a variant eye", searching both for other gay or queer people, and gay or queer content in books: "Often wrong, always hopeful, my gay antennae never rested" (41-42). And yet, she writes, of many of her attempts to locate her sexuality within books, "still the words I needed to see in print remained invisible" (44). This third way of reading takes elements from both reading strategies so far discussed: reading as recognition and as research, combining the intuitive readings made in relation to covers and titles with the rigorous research and forensic close-readings in operation in the various accounts discussed above. It pushes them further, however, into a mode most closely aligned with reading as a kind of decoding practice. For queer readers, the textual decoding discussed throughout this section acts as an urgent and necessary addition to their critical toolkit, to be deployed when other ways of reading fail to provide them with the content they require. Sherrie A. Inness, for example, writes that lesbianism is a "'clue', a 'secret', a 'mystery' that must be detangled from the surface narrative" (280). This is, Inness suggests, "the quest and search that the lesbian reader must pursue, because mainstream fiction and life are typically so inimical to lesbian representation" (280). Hennegan similarly describes reading as "a serendipitous game of Hide and Seek" in which "the only clues came from occasional hints dropped casually but discreetly by helpful teachers, from playground gossip, from the intricate system of coded cross reference and allusion embedded in the works of writers I had already recognised as 'mine' or sympathetic to me" (182). To remedy this need to read for such coded, elusive references to the queer, Hennegan and Lynch model close-reading strategies, but these are strategies, too, which centre

around subtext, nuance and inference. Reading for queer content was, as Lynch admits, "all guesswork" (44).

'Queer reading', in general, tends to be characterised as a mode of reading that seeks to uncover a concealed subtext beneath the surface meaning of a text. This is the "symptomatic reading", bluntly outlined by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus: "a queer symptomatic reading might interpret the closet, or ghosts, as surface signs of the deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted" (3). While I categorise this kind of queer reading as perhaps the most 'obvious', the most frequently covered in discussions of textuality and sexuality, it is nevertheless a reading strategy with a long and valuable history, imbued with affective significance by many LGBTQ individuals who sought to find representation where none appeared immediately forthcoming. Amy was one such reader. "I've been queer reading for as long as I've understood narrative and understood difference", she claims in our second conversation. She defines queer reading as "finding non-normative relationships where straight people wouldn't see them". She usefully breaks this down into two categories: "finding relationships of a sexual and emotionally connected nature where the author didn't necessarily put them", and "where you think maybe that the author was hinting that they put them but couldn't say it because it would be too much for the rest of the [heterosexual] audience". Just as Amy emphasises what it is that straight people "wouldn't see", the lesbian literary critics of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s tended to privilege in particular metaphors of sight and vision, which suggested particular critical or interpretive skills on the part of lesbian readers. Gillian Hanscombe, for example, characterises this as reading through "lesbian specs" through which "all was revealed" (111).

In a neat example of this particular practice, Amy shares with me a memory of watching Australian soap opera *Home and Away* (1988-present) aired on British television "quite a long time ago", when Amy was "quite young […] Fifteen". Teenage

Shannon, played by Isla Fisher, wants to leave school in order to pursue her ambition to become "a world famous writer". She meets an older woman, also a writer, who becomes a kind of mentor figure. They move in together, into a caravan or mobile home, "and she's being a mentor to help her do her writing, and I don't know what happens after that, I can't remember", Amy tells me. It is on the surface both seemingly unclear and unimportant. However, "I was intrigued by it in a way that I could not understand", Amy explains. She goes on to detail how she learned, only "a couple of years ago" that *Home and Away* was broadcast not in the 5.30pm 'after-school' slot in Australia, but post-watershed, after 9pm, and that "actually they were lesbians. And that's what it was all about. She went away to be a lesbian with this woman." On learning this, Amy responds "that entirely makes sense to me". But "[n]o wonder it [the storyline] didn't make any bloody sense", she notes, "because it had all been edited out in a real hatchet job". What is so fascinating about her account is that this notion of intrigue persisted over so many years. "I still saw there was something there", Amy maintains. "I picked up on some kind of cues." Amy was able to read around or through an edited version of the narrative to reveal its innate queerness. She "saw that [storyline], somehow understood it, even though any reference to sexuality had been taken out of it, to the point where the narrative didn't even make any sense". "[T]hat is the power, the remarkable power of the queer eye", she asserts, "which can never be denied."

I now turn to a more in depth discussion of retrieving queer subtext from an apparently "unpromising text", in O'Rourke's phrase (141). In Chapter One, I use the example of Kate's rereading of *Ring of Bright Water*, Gavin Maxwell's memoir of his isolated life on the West coast of Scotland, to interrogate what the object of the book might communicate with the reader, haptically, and through its material presence within the oral history interview. Here, I examine Kate's engagement with the book in textual terms. In the first part of our conversation, Kate put forward her own

interpretation of the book at the level of content: what is contained in – or left out of – the narrative itself. Those elements of Maxwell's memoir that Kate responded to in childhood with boredom, she met in adulthood with a kind of sideways humour. There are, she notes, "some hilarious bits"; not intentionally funny, perhaps, but moments when, in Kate's phrase, she "had a bit of a laugh at the book's expense". "Some sentences sounded", she explains, "like a kind of parody". These too, are moments of disjuncture; gaps between the surface narrative and what might lie beneath, that Kate had to work to "reconcile", as she puts it. She identifies some strands of Maxwell's narrative which are implied, rather than overtly stated. One circulates around the issue of class. Struggling with the fact that "you don't know who he is or what he does", Kate's reading of Maxwell is pieced together from what he, as she terms it, "lets slip". He's "always disappearing, he's always going travelling", she complains:

> he sort of mentions in an off-hand way that, you know, a friend of his at Oxford gave him a house in Scotland, and that, um, and also he's got a flat in London, and then there's this family pile in, in southern Scotland somewhere. So you get a sense that, er, he's very, you know, he's kind of upper class and, um, there's a lot of money.

Alongside this is "a real colonial subtext". Maxwell comes across, Kate explains, like an "old colonial type sat in a leather armchair, reminiscing about, 'Of course, the time that I was with the marsh Arabs in Iraq'". Another example of disconnect is the undercurrent (and sometimes an overspilling) of violence, that runs throughout the book. She notes, for example, that:

> I think maybe what I couldn't reconcile when I was a child, what confused me slightly, was the fact that he purported to be an animal lover or a nature lover, but then he spent such a lot of time killing animals, and I couldn't quite work out what that was about. But, you know, according to the logic of the book, it's, you know, if you live in nature that's what you have to do, kill things.

However, Kate accurately – although unknowingly – locates what she calls the "central funny, but slightly troubling thing" about *Ring of Bright Water*: "…there's

massive things going on in the world but where's my otter?". She offers the following textual example, paraphrasing Maxwell, and offering her own gloss:

> there's this kind of throwaway sentence: but then there was a revolution in Iraq, and they were playing football with the King's head. And, er, and so I didn't get my otter. And of this gamewarden I heard no more [...] he's moving hell and high water to find, to find himself an otter. Um, and the, the sort of logistics of it are just ridiculous, like, he's building glass tanks in his garden, and whatnot [...] And he takes it round Harrods. I think that moment says it all […] you have to wonder what kind of person he is.

The "whole project", she asserts, "seems [...] a bit ill-conceived and incongruous". It raises questions, for Kate – what's motivating Maxwell? What does this narrative reveal about him? And what, moreover, does it conceal? "It's like, he's otter obsessed", Kate tells me: "it's like he's got an otter fetish".

I put it to Kate that her interpretation of the book is that "there are gaps" that she was "having to read around" and "felt frustrated by"; a statement to which she agrees. "It had homosexual but in denial written all over it", as she puts it. This reading, then, of *Ring of Bright Water*'s queer undercurrent, is Kate's discovery, although, as she says, appropriating a suitably Maxwellian metaphor, "I was *thrown off the scent* by his mentions of female companions". Indeed, researching Maxwell's biography after my conversation with Kate made her interpretation even more compelling. A purportedly autobiographical work, Maxwell's alleged homosexuality is strikingly absent from his memoir. The displacement of "sex and relationships" by what Maxwell himself described as a "compensatory passion", "a thraldom to otters", has been noted by critics (Field n. pag.). Robert Macfarlane has commented on the "psycho-dramas" and "sublimated sexuality" of *Ring of Bright Water* and Maxwell's earlier work, *Harpoon at a Venture*; "they represent […] part of the dark side of British nature-memoir and landscape writing" (qtd. in Field n. pag.). Helen Macdonald writes in *H is for Hawk*, comparing Maxwell to T.H. White, that "it took me a long time to realise how many of our classic books on animals were by gay writers who wrote of their relationships with

animals in lieu of human loves of which they could not speak" (40). As Kate puts it "we know all about the character of the otter but we don't know anything about the character of these actual human beings".

Alison Waller suggests that "those affective scripts that speak of desire, hidden emotion, and – most abhorrently – boredom" are "the traces that are most elusive in narratives of remembered childhood books" (113). In this interview, however, all three emerge. This is perhaps one way in which talking about books perhaps allows affective responses that may be otherwise repressed or policed – "abhorrently" is a strong adverb to deploy, here – to find expression, either overtly or covertly. Waller labels these affective "traces" as "sticky", and indeed, it seems when applied to the conversation under discussion here, that boredom, as a response, somehow brings up or attaches to these other "elusive" emotional responses; "hidden emotion"; buried, stifled or sublimated desire (113). During the course of our interview, I revealed to Kate some of the missing information about the "actual human beings" she had identified as being so peculiarly absent from the text. This information was delivered anecdotally, and gleaned from multiple sources, including the third volume of Kathleen Raine's own autobiography, *The Lion's Mouth*, published in 1977, and Janet Watts's obituary of Raine in *The Guardian,* following her death aged 95, which I had previously read. Refusing to admit his homosexuality, Maxwell pursued a destructive relationship with Raine, a poet (as discussed in Chapter One, *Ring of Bright Water* takes both its title and epigraph from one of Raine's poems). Rejected by Maxwell, Raine put a curse on a rowan tree near Maxwell's home. Following this, Maxwell's beloved otter Mijbil was killed – allegedly slaughtered by a local roadmender – and Maxwell's house, Camusfeàrna, burned down. Raine thus believed herself to have contributed to a – perhaps *the* – great tragedy of Maxwell's life. "[H]e broke her heart, basically, and she cursed the house and then the otter died, and she felt that it was all her fault", I interject, in the audio recording. Kate's verdict on my intervention concerning Raine

was as follows: "That makes this book *interesting*." Waller goes on to state that "[i]f, according to Barthes's view, desire is a contract between reader and text that circulates around gaps and hidden pleasures, that contract is broken when the surface of a childhood book offers only obstruction" (118). Kate shows, however, the catalysing effect of boredom, as Julian Jason Haladyn and Michael E. Gardiner suggest, to spark potential and to make meaning (3-11). Boredom can be transformed into its opposite number. "*Interest"* can be a synonym for desire. I suggest that there is something specifically queer in the "hidden emotions" to be found behind and beyond such obstructions. What "as a childhood reader", Kate "just thought [...] was a bit odd, and a bit boring", in adulthood is transfigured into something unexpectedly alluring. Kate *wants* something from this narrative – "I really wanted him to be gay" – and her readerly desire finds a reciprocal, answering call in Maxwell's text and subtext, its unexpected depths and passionate undercurrents.

For other of my narrators, too, this kind of readerly sleuthing goes beyond the textual to operate also at the level of author and biography. Talking of her lifelong interest in the Moomins series, and its author Tove Jansson, Amy explains how she "found out that she had lived with a woman for so many years" and "found out that one of the characters Too-Ticky is based on her long-time partner". Some critics have commented on Jansson's introduction of characters who could be read, explicitly or otherwise, as queer. For Frank Cottrell Boyce, who writes that "[s]ome of the richest seams of gay culture are those that were mined by artists who had to use disguises and codes", Jansson's "inseparable Thingummy and Bob with their stolen ruby and secret code" and "the highly competent and utterly calm Too Ticky [sic]" are "some of the most endearing gay characters in all literature" (n. pag.). The "helpful and spontaneous" character of Too-Ticky, who appears later in the *Moomin* series, is indeed based on Jansson's long-term same-sex partner, Tuulikki Pietela, as Nancy Huse notes (157). For Amy, "that was like 'wow, okay, maybe…', and I kind of thought, is that why I

like this book?" "[I]t was kind of weird," she explains, "'cos then, like you start thinking, oh, well, did I somehow read between some kind of lines, and saw that connection"?

Speaking of another author to whom she felt drawn, Edwin Morgan, Amy tells me that he "was a Scottish poet, who was also gay [...] I liked knowing that he was gay and that not everybody did know that". Equipped with this information, Amy recalls wondering whether "there might be some hidden message in some of his stuff, that would just be for me"; "that kind of thing," she adds, "was cool". Amy goes on to explicate a complex interweaving of affective response and critical reading. It is "exciting", she explains, "because you're starting to see something that you identify with". It is also "frustrating" because "it's not overt enough for your liking". Further, it's "furtive in a way" because "you're reading something, you're seeing something that nobody else can see, so kind of quite cool to be part of that gang". She continues: "you can see stuff, and you think, oh they're speaking to me and my people".

This emphasis on subtext extends outwards, to include the idea of reading intertextually, across a queer paracanon, in order to create a composite assemblage of characters, episodes, settings, affiliations and identifications which contribute to the construction of queer selfhood. Jo, for example, makes freewheeling, associative connections between several texts and authors, following a thread initially to Achilles, in "My Beautiful Book of Leg-Ends" – a favoured collection of Greek mythology, recollected complete with childhood mispronunciation. Achilles's mother dressed him as a girl, and sent him to live among other young women on the island of Skyros, only to be found out by "crafty Ulysses" when his attention was caught by a sword rather than by jewellery given to the other 'girls':

> I didn't like that bit of the story, because I wouldn't have been interested in a fucking sword. And I thought it was really silly of Achilles to go for it. And then of course, silly fucker, he went off to the Trojan War and got killed, after doing really horrible things to people. So I didn't like that bit of the story but I got very excited by him being dressed up as a girl and all that.

From Achilles to Hercules – "there were the ten labours of Hercules, or was it twelve labours of – how many labours did Hercules? – Hercules had a lot of, a lot of labours, poor love" – who, at the end of his life, married a woman who dressed him in women's clothing and forced him to spin thread: "this was supposed to be a really terrible humiliating and appalling thing". "[I]t's kind of interesting," Jo muses, "how, in those legends, you know, there were gender variant things happening." From the Greeks, to a "spoilt", "disagreeable" Eastern European prince in Enid Blyton's *The Circus of Adventure* (1952), to a spy who dressed as a woman in a book remembered as *The Two Spies*, and "came to a bad end", to Hornblower in CS Forester's eponymous series, "afraid" and "ashamed of being afraid", "awkward and ill-at-ease in his own body" and "alienated from himself". Jo strongly recognises and identifies with each of these characters, including with – perhaps, especially with – their humiliation and their distress. "There was nobody like me", she explains, "the people I've mentioned are probably the only instances".

However, "although there were queer elements in these stories", Jo asserts, "they weren't queer stories". Rather, she is establishing a paracanon of texts which she can read into or against, inscribing queerness within them. This culminates with a reading of Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (1950), a word of mouth recommendation by a psychiatrist whom she met as an eighteen year old while working at Dingleton Mental Hospital. "[O]ne of the chapters was called "The Indians of the Plains", Jo recalls. She relates Erikson's discussion: as part of initiation rituals into manhood, adolescent boys were taught to remember their dreams, and the symbolism of these dreams. A bow and arrow signified masculinity, but a "woman's burden strap" offered a thrillingly different prospect. "I didn't really know what a burden strap was", Jo admits, "but I was kind of terribly excited by this." By informing the community elders of his dream, she explains, a boy who dreamed of this symbol of womanhood "would be allowed to wear women's clothes and live as a woman and do women's

tasks. And he would be honoured and respected for that". It is a profoundly charged memory for Jo. "And, um, gosh", she adds, "[i]t makes me cry even to think about it."

Jo's queer paracanon thus ranges widely and wildly across children's books, seventeenth century mystic poetry, imperialist Victorian adventure stories, contemporary twentieth century poetry, and ethnographic non-fiction, cramming her metaphorical shelves in toppling disarray. *My Beautiful Book of Legends*, *The Circus of Adventure* and Hornblower, are shelved alongside Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* (1844). As we move into a discussion of her reading in adolescence, these are folded in with other reading memories, as well as snippets of biographical knowledge about particular authors. "At one stage I discovered that Dumas was black, he was mixed-race. He was a real outsider in French society […] I thought maybe that's why I really took to this man's writing", she explains. Still later, "Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* who I really loved because he was a bit feminine", Federico Garcia Lorca, and San Juan de la Cruz; Ursula Le Guin, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886) and even Rider Haggard's character Alan Quartermain – "maybe even Rider Haggard, I don't know, it's probably stretching things a bit, maybe there was something about him". The "codes" she is deciphering are, rather than those established by period or mode, transhistorical, crossing generic and disciplinary boundaries. This consciously constructed, parallel narrative is always interleaved with and thrown into relief by more established or mainstream readings; it remains subtextual, something that, by implication, only certain readers, "people like myself", as Jo puts it, can pick up on. "I suffered very greatly, from the lack of role models, suffered hugely. A lack of role models in any medium at all – film, plays", she explains. "And so those little, precious little traces, *Derek the Dragon*, St John of the Cross, Lorca, were so, so important to me." There are, she explains "so many transgendered or differently-gendered people in human society, everywhere, in every society, we've existed and we still do exist […] we think we're alone, and we're not alone […] Queerness has always

existed. Even in the Bible". The particular reading strategies that Jo practices – the decoding, the attuning to "resonances", the careful attention to "traces" – signal her participation within this community signified by "we" and "we're". "We're like a hidden stream", she comments.

Indeed, for those readers who practice this mode of reading, it is a participation they may be unwilling to give up. Contemplating the (positive) consequences of a perceived rise in queer representation within mainstream culture, Amy nevertheless asserts at the close of our second interview, "I just hope that queer reading doesn't become a thing of the past". While celebrating increased assimilation of queer narratives – that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, "people can access that stuff very easily" – Amy acknowledges the specific textual pleasures offered by queer reading-as-decoding. "I wouldn't have missed that", she confesses. "[N]ow I start to sound like some eejit, all nostalgic about this rubbish past, but I wouldn't miss out on that. Because it's really fun, actually, it makes you feel like you're part of a secret cool club." The affirmation this readerly stance affords is valuable to queer readers, in and of itself. And, as with the other modes of reading outlined in this chapter, in finding and recognising something of the queer within these texts, queer readers find something in themselves recognised, and affirmed. "And you know", finishes Amy, "I still like a lesbian nod in the street."

Conclusion

In examining these readerly processes through LGBTQ adults' memories of reading, I use specific examples from LGBTQ reading histories as case studies to think through some of the various processes and practices grouped under the rubric of 'queer reading', and to showcase some specific findings within a diverse field. The various modes of reading I outline here are available to and are, to some extent, practised by all readers. Indeed, these modes – instinctive, meticulous, sleuthing – are indicative of the

strangeness and complexity of the hermeneutic process more broadly. My narrators help to illustrate the way that engagements between LGBTQ readers and books are also, often, matters of reading paratext – cover, title, publisher's details, illustration – and that these parts of the book are as meaningful and constitutive of queer identity as the narrative more usually seen as its locus. As a distinct set of reading processes my narrators display related behaviours; among them, annotating, consulting reference works, memorisation, archival research and close reading. Books are key reference materials for LGBTQ readers during childhood and adolescence. My narrators read resistantly, between the lines, to uncover traces and decode allusions they perceive – often in very personal and private ways – to be resonant with their LGBTQ identities. They report careful engagement and close reading of their chosen texts, even as they respond to cover or illustration, or re-assemble these texts' and paratexts' ostensible meanings into a set of queer subtexts. Queer reading, then, is more than the process of *queering*; rather, this is just one readerly practice among several close textual, paratextual, subtextual and intertextual engagements carried out by LGBTQ readers. The feature in my narrators' accounts which brings these modes into conjunction is repetition. Rereading of selected passages, for example, or revisiting illustrations from an adult perspective: these are particular uses of books which both enact close reading but also intervene in the overall narrative, allowing queer subtext to become legible in previously unaccessed or unaccessible ways. In the following chapter, I explore this interrelation of reading and repetition, and how time and memory complicate our existing picture of queer reading.

Chapter Four
"The childhood I was meant to be in": The queer time of reading

"Long after childhood, I clung to childish things", writes Andrew Solomon in an autobiographical introduction to his meticulously researched, doorstop study of identity acquisition and parent-child relationships, *Far from the Tree* (2014); "what growing up portended for me was too humiliating" (10). His shame, in childhood and adolescence, was his homosexuality, and one of the "childish things" in which he took refuge was a book – AA Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928). "I had some far-fetched idea", he admits, "that I would be Christopher Robin forever in the Hundred Acre Wood" (10). Solomon goes on to cite the closing lines of *The House at Pooh Corner* in full: "'Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on top of the Forest, a little boy and his Bear will always be playing'" (10). For Solomon, this vision was both beguiling – "I decided", he writes, "that I would be that boy and that bear" – and appalling. It painfully mirrored his own disavowal of societally expected, heteronormative progression. "Indeed", he continues, "the final chapter of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books felt so much like my story that I couldn't bear to hear it, though I had my father read me all the other chapters hundreds of times" (10). Unable to reconcile his emerging knowledge of his sexual orientation with the possibility of a viable future as a mature adult, Solomon instead operated a schema of stubborn refusal, of 'stuckness'. To avoid what he perceived as the inevitable and unbearable humiliation of either acknowledging and acting on, or denying his same-sex desires, Solomon hoped instead to shore up a "dam against sexuality", to "freeze [himself] in puerility" (10). Attempts to reroute his narrative along more conventional lines failed miserably. "At thirteen," he reports, "I bought a copy of *Playboy* and spent hours studying it, trying to resolve my discomfort with female anatomy; it was much more gruelling than my homework" (10-11). "Discomfort", "female anatomy",

"gruelling": his language is stilted, clinical, embattled; his experience far removed from the fleeting, solipsistic, sensual pleasures more usually associated with pornography. Instead, Solomon practised a "wilful immaturity", its aim nothing less than "obliterating desire" entirely (10). But to obliterate desire is also to obliterate the self. "By the time I reached high school", he writes, "I knew I had to have sex with women sooner or later and felt that I couldn't do so, and thought often about dying" (11). "The half of me that wasn't planning to be Christopher Robin playing forever in an enchanted place was planning to be Anna Karenina throwing myself in front of a train," he continues. "It was a ludicrous duality" (11).

Each future posited by these radically diverging choices of reading material is, for Solomon, impossible in its own way, from Milne's endless childhood idyll to the tragic melodrama of Anna Karenina's suicide – which is no future at all. In looking backwards, from adulthood to childhood, LGBTQ adults are often compelled to retroactively construct the self as always-already queer – in itself a project that requires a conceptual torsion I aim to unpack a little later in this chapter. This is what Kathryn Bond Stockton refers to in her 2009 study *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* as the "gay child's 'backwards birth'" (6). To suggest otherwise can seem to call queerness-in-adulthood into question, to position it as a choice; something that it might be possible to circumvent, or even to reverse. From within childhood and adolescence, however, queerness can work to stymie forwards momentum. It portends humiliation, as Solomon explains, or worse, annihilation; the fear, as Stockton puts it, that there is "simply nowhere to grow":

> What would become of the child one feared oneself to be? For adults, then, who from a young age felt they were attracted to others in wrong ways, the notion of a gay child – however conceptually problematic – may be a throwback to a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark [...] Or hanging in suspense - even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble. (3)

For Solomon, Milne's and Tolstoy's narratives model the only outcomes his teenage self is able to envision. They are, in the progressive past tense of his adolescence, what he "was planning". It is only in retrospect that he is able to critique this binary – between a nostalgic backpedalling in perpetuity, or a kind of nihilistic hurtling to a halt – as "ludicrous". From an adult perspective he is able instead to advance a self-narrative that can – while retracing these snarls and culs-de-sac – also *progress* from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. The conclusion to his study is another autobiographical reflection – this time on his own journey to queer reproduction and parenthood. In this fourth chapter, I want to consider another dimension to the conjunction of queerness, childhood, reading and the book, as made manifest through oral histories of reading: namely, how do books and reading enable us to think about queerness in *time*? How has reading helped my narrators to negotiate and construct queer time? What uses have they made of the narratives they encountered in childhood and adolescence? And, following from that, how does queerness enable us to think differently about the time of reading, and about the book as a mechanism for unfolding time in new ways? I begin by outlining some of the particular complexities of narrating LGBTQ lives. I then discuss examples of my narrators' use of books and reading to negotiate and facilitate nonlinear temporal experiences relating to their sexuality and gender identity, with particular reference to Andy's rereading of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and Carol's re-encounter with Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did at School* (1873). Finally, I turn to the affordances of the material book, investigating through memories of 'sampling' – reading from many books simultaneously – skipping, repeated rereading and reading up to a certain point, the uses my narrators make of books to open up new narrative possibilities, and, relatedly, to create new possibilities for their own lives outside of books.

Storying LGBTQ lives

'Continuity of the self' is a concept often privileged in oral history praxis. Lynn Abrams writes in *Oral History Theory*, for example, that the "oral historian who conducts a life story interview certainly finds it desirable that the individual is able to construct a narrative characterised by temporal continuity" (38). Abrams suggests that the 'desirable' narrative is one that "establish[es] relationships between past and present and links between events in a coherent chronology rather than a series of snapshots bearing no relation to one another" (38). Invoking R.D. Laing's notion of the "divided self", she goes so far as to suggest that "[i]f a person is unable to create a sense of historical continuity in a life story, this indicates an undeveloped sense of self or even the existence of a personality disorder." (38). But paying attention to LGBTQ lives inevitably involves grappling with issues of tricky temporality. To (re)present a non-normative sexuality, even to oneself, disrupts the expected narrative of presumed heterosexuality, and its chrononormative progression – (straight) marriage, (heterosexual) reproduction. These are issues to which the queer oral historian must remain alert. I find the model of "queer time" put forward by critics such as Judith [J. Jack] Halberstam useful here. Noting that "[o]bviously not all gay, lesbian and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts", Halberstam theorises queer time as something that develops "at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (1). Rather than being a worrying pathology, as Abrams seems to frame it, 'disorder' is a lived reality for many of my narrators, and there is a certain political imperative in rehabilitating it as such. For Halberstam, queerness is "the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence-early adulthood-marriage-reproduction-child rearing-retirement-death", as they put it in a 2006 roundtable discussion organised by Carolyn Dinshaw (182). Foregrounding the *partial* aspect of Halberstam's formulation of queer time, I want to concentrate on the nuanced reality that living an LGBTQ life is,

for so many, not a complete "turn away" from "narrative coherence", but unavoidably an exercise in assimilation and integration, a grafting or braiding of the normative and the queer. Many of my narrators are negotiating their queerness *alongside* and intermingled with previous heterosexual relationships, current heterosexual relationships, children born within heterosexual partnerships, children who remain unaware of their queer identities, accepting extended and blended families, and several other combinations and permutations of the 'straight' and the queer. Queerness, as it variously plays out for my narrators, twists and alters chronology and narrative coherence into new and surprising forms. Nevertheless, my narrators must negotiate the demands that narrative makes in everyday life – and in the oral history interview.

Frequently, for example, lived experience of non-normative sexuality requires the superimposition of another story, the 'coming out' narrative, in order to explain and integrate it into a life history. We are less than ninety seconds into our first interview when, responding to my invitation to "tell me a little bit about yourself", Amy mentions that it is "coming up to" her "twenty year coming-out-iversary". "I have known I was a lesbian since I was about thirteen I would say", Amy tells me. Of all my narrators, Amy has one of the most distinct 'coming out' stories, and she moves smoothly into it as our interview progresses. Amy "came out, or more specifically, was outed" when she was fourteen, after telling a few close friends at her secondary school, Lanark Grammar. Born in Lanark, "about forty-five, fifty minutes from Glasgow and about an hour from Edinburgh […] right in the middle of the central belt", Amy grew up in "a very small place just outside […] in the countryside", and attended Underbank Primary School, followed by Lanark Grammar School. Following this brief factual narrative, the story of her 'coming out' or 'outing' is the first piece of personal information she chooses to share with me. It is clearly something of a personal milestone. She then goes on to describe her adult location and status (in both relationship and professional terms): she now lives in Glasgow's West End, with her

civil partner, with whom she has been in a relationship for three and a half years, and works in London, following a PhD at the University of Glasgow. In these first few introductory sentences, Amy positions herself geographically (Lanark and the surrounding countryside, Glasgow, London) and temporally (birth, adolescence, adulthood). She also positions herself in terms of her sexual orientation. In addition to forming a significant co-ordinate in her psychic 'life space' – she identifies as a lesbian and occupies that ontological position in her daily life and interactions – Amy's acceptance of her sexuality is also point in time, a 'before' and 'after' around which other experiences are organised and retrospectively understood. "It was kind of a cool thing", Amy tells me, "when I realised that I'd been out longer than I'd been in." Rather than the spatially organising aspect of sexuality discussed in Chapter Two, Amy's emphasis on age, anniversary and the passage of time here spotlights the intersection between temporality and sexuality. 'Coming out', then, can be a feature or milestone of the LGBTQ life history, a queer rite of passage akin to a first kiss, date, loss of virginity, or marriage.

It is not always so straightforward. The overt story Amy is telling me – that she has "known" about her lesbianism "from the age of about thirteen", is overlaid with and interweaved with other interpretations or accounts. There are slippages and moments of discomposure in her narrative that serve paradoxically to draw attention to its crafted and well-rehearsed nature. The tension between "came out, or more specifically was outed" exposes Amy's initial reluctance to admit any lack of agency on her part, perhaps from a sense that to be "outed" is something shameful, implying fear, or a lack of pride in her sexuality, whereas to have come out of her own accord – particularly at fourteen and in a school environment – may rather be considered a brave or daring act. There can be a kind of polyphony at work even in one person's voiced self-narrative, as Amy's account demonstrates: there are the other possibilities for self-expression or definition, other subject positions which Amy has moved in and

out of over time. For example, asked to describe her sexual orientation and gender identity, Amy answers that "I describe myself as a lesbian, and more specifically as a butch lesbian. I would also identify with queer, and I have at times been interested in and I guess identified with non-gender-binary." Lesbian, butch lesbian, queer, non-gender-binary: these terms jostle more-or-less comfortably alongside each other in Amy's self-narrative, in which her identity is both specific and constant ("I describe myself […] specifically as a butch lesbian") and encompassing and transitory ("queer", "non-gender-binary", "at times"). "When I was a kid", she goes on to explain, "I thought I was going to grow up to be a man". Amy describes herself as "always […] a tomboy", but "[m]ore than that [...] quite, kind of, masculine-identified." She had "somehow become aware that people had sex-change operations, as they were then called […] and it just didn't really seem like a big deal". She talks me through her shifting conception of her gender identity, from thinking that "I'd probably just have one" – thinking that she would probably transition – to her position at the time of talking to me, of being "really glad I didn't transition, because I'm not trans, and I'm not a man". Hers is a multifaceted identity: "[m]y female identity is very important to me, as important to me as my lesbian identity, but I just happen to be very masculine identified".

Even a seemingly simple coming out narrative – "I have known I was a lesbian since I was about thirteen" – conceals layers and loops of understanding. It develops over time, snags or short-circuits time, circles back on itself, and could have taken many multiple alternative paths. Treading an intriguing line between essentialist and constructionist discourses, Amy has "known" her sexuality as something integral, inherent, fixed, and yet at the same time admits that "[a]t one point I thought I was trying to decide if I was bisexual or if I was a lesbian, and realised that I would be pleased if the result was that I was a lesbian". Here, she introduces choice to the vexed question of etiology: "once I'd decided", she continues, "I just felt, yeah, okay, well, that's what it is". Her sexuality is at once something she has made an active *decision*

about and something that just *is*, that has a "result" – "it was almost like I wanted to know the answer to something", she explains. What is so fascinating about Amy's account, for the purposes of this study, is her attribution of her current understanding of her sexuality and gender identity as something directly related to, and indeed created and nurtured by, her identity *as a reader.* The "answer" she is looking for is often to be found in books.

Amy describes herself as a "masculine-identified" child, "more than" a tomboy. As evidence, she describes her affiliations with various male characters. Noddy is "a bit of a square", Amy suggests, but "he was probably my favourite character […] I kind of identified with him, I wanted to be Noddy […] popular, […] driving around in his little car". Similarly, "the next kind of clean-cut hero figure I can think of like that […] who's been really important to me in my life," she explains, "was Tintin": "I guess they do have some kind of similarities in that they themselves don't have an awful lot of personality […] they're a bit goody-two-shoes […] but I really identified with both of those." In talking through her childhood and adolescent likes and dislikes, these affiliations and aversions, Amy sets up Noddy, Tintin, the Mr Men – "Mr Happy, yeah, he's cool" – He Man, and later Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and various examples of mid-century American fiction by Ray Bradbury and Ken Kesey among others, against what she terms "girls' books". "Wasn't so keen on the Little Miss", Amy tells me. "She Ra was just rubbish". Amy metaphorically sets up 'boys' and 'girls' books as two clearly demarcated categories: she has never "done *Pippi Longstocking*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Pollyanna*, never done any of that stuff." "*Little Women,* you know," she continues, "all the books that women often say were big books for them, were not really big books for me." She makes an exception for Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), adding "but *Catcher in the Rye* beats that one". Amy freely admits that "all my friends read the *Babysitter* books. Never read any of that stuff. Never read *Sweet Valley High*, which a lot of my friends read as

well". Speculating that "[t]hey were about things that I wasn't too fussed about, I guess" – "going out with boys, and all sitting around gossiping" – Amy dismisses them out of hand: "I wasn't interested in that stuff […] I just wasn't interested". As she moves into adolescence, however, her reading incorporates material with explicitly lesbian characters; Joanna Trollope's *A Village Affair* (1989), and lesbian erotica featuring specifically butch characters, as discussed in previous chapters, to name just two examples.

Browsing Glasgow Waterstones for books with LGBTQ content in the mid-1990s, Amy recalls purchasing a couple of "very dense political tomes", but also some "lesbian erotica". Not, she stresses, because she "went looking for erotica" but "because it was what was on the shelf", "because it was there". Amy's forays into the lesbian and gay section of a Glasgow bookshop at a particular cultural moment – the mid-90s – have been encountered in each of the previous three chapters. They have been analysed in relation to the haptic – in material terms these volumes are, as previously discussed, "pretty well thumbed"; in relation to the spaces and places of queer reading – the liberation and containment of the Waterstones setting; and in relation to queer close-reading: Amy read and reread these books *because* they feature lesbian characters, content and themes. Here, however, I would like to turn to Amy's reflections on the particular affordances of this stumbled-upon reading material in temporal terms; to how it enabled her to construct her lesbian identity *at that moment in time* and to the ways in which she has used those memories of reading to make and remake that self-construction. While the "political tomes" contributed to Amy's "political awakening", they also relied on "an awful lot of prior knowledge" that she "just simply did not have"; "my understanding of feminism was so cursory", she explains, "and my understanding of lesbian feminism was totally non-existent". The erotic short stories, however – "digestible", "exciting" and "pretty graphic" – contributed to what might be thought of as a sexual awakening. In this regard the issue

of "prior knowledge" has a different slant to it. "It wasn't", she explains "like I had discovered something new": "it was that I read about something which I hadn't been able to articulate before, but already knew about, you know, it's completely different from discovering something, it's being reassured of something, that it's not just you." Referring back to her own self-conception of her gender identity over time, Amy articulates her emerging understanding of "[t]hat spectrum, erm, that you're not aware of when you're a kid"; that "you can have all of those masculine attributes and still be a woman". What Sedgwick refers to as the "irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness" of queer survival and its myriad possible permutations, became obvious to Amy, she tells me, "through things like reading" (*Tendencies* 3). Reading offers Amy a way through, a balancing set of stories to compete with, aid construction of, or reflect her self-narrative – necessarily tangled, contradictory, provisional and unstable, for all its surface categorisation and constancy.

The linearity of narratives of the self – the neat stepping-stones of being first this, and then this, and now, as a result, this – is shown to be deceptively slippery, even in one person's seemingly fluent account of their identity over time. Several of my narrators are quite clear about their adult sexualities and identities in answer to my direct questioning, and yet without my interventions, these aspects of the self would have remained unarticulated. Kate, Mary, Julia and Carol all use the interview space to talk up to and around their own coming-to-awareness moments concerning their sexuality, which all seem to crystallise in early adulthood, just out of reach of the span of my questioning. Each of these four women reflects from the vantage point of someone who has been living, comfortably, with self-acceptance around her identity and relationships for some years – even decades – and yet those moments remain blanks or gaps in the rich texture of the material I gathered over the course of our conversations. Vital as my narrators' understandings of their sexualities and identities were to the premise of our encounter – that they self-identified as LGBTQ was, after all,

one of their main motivations in speaking to me, and one of mine in speaking to them – acknowledgement of same-sex or queer desire (again, both theirs and mine) existed primarily in the intersubjective, unspoken understanding between us. The effect of this situation is a tacit understanding that, for these narrators, there may have been a similar 'before' and 'after' moment as for Amy, as discussed above; a point in time around which their conception of their sexualities and identities altered. They may have revised and returned to memories and experiences in childhood and adolescence with a changed perspective. That much of this remains largely unspoken, however, means that this temporal 'rewinding' and the reflections it prompts are implied rather than explicit during our conversations, a sensed rather than articulated undercurrent that nevertheless exerts a certain pull throughout our discussions.

For others I interviewed, sequential coherence slips out of reach altogether. "I got married, I had children," Mark tells me. "I have a grandchild as well, and didn't come out until much later in life." As he goes on to explain: "it took me a long time to realise I was gay [...] although, clearly, there were kind of, er, attitudes and thoughts and so on that lots of people would recognise as, as me being gay, I didn't necessarily recognise them myself, or chose not to." Mark now identifies as a "gay man. Yeah. But it took me till I was almost forty to say that out loud." Eileen, who had two children in a heterosexual marriage before meeting her female partner, with whom she has had two more children, resists labelling her sexual orientation. She prefers to find continuity in a "nascent feminism, a feminist sort of perspective, which [...] I had certainly had long before I was aware that I was gay, or, let's not say gay, that I was attracted to women sexually." These narrators have separated out their 'straight' and 'gay' life experiences, into two discrete modes. And yet, the latter mode – their acceptance of their same-sex desire – encourages, even demands, a reappraisal of the former, as I discuss below.

The temporalities of trans life-narratives may be most at odds with a straightforward sequentiality. As trans scholar Grace Lavery has written, "[t]rans

narratology teaches us that neither a singular narrative of becoming, nor the laying out of life as a causal sequence, will do justice to the complexity of trans identification. Trans lives slip and slide, forward and backward in time" (@graceelavery). That Lavery is using Twitter to express this as a personal reflection suggests something of the embeddedness of the complex experience of time in the everyday lives of trans people; the demotic is underpinned by and interwoven with the scholarly, and vice versa. Trans time proliferates in new ways, as the past is altered, and pluralised by, the present. The past, then, becomes infinite possible pasts: multiple, various, and subjective, in a very lived and empirical sense. Lavery notes, too, that she is not "the only one with a stake in the question" (@graceelavery). In her "34 years pre-transition", she acknowledges, her "actions were received and internalized by others" who "may resist [...] having their memories rescripted" (@graceelavery). Negotiating this complicated tense of becoming-what-one-always-was is not only an intriguing theoretical knot to unpick, but a daily challenge which threads through queer – and perhaps especially, through trans – lives, the stories individuals are able to tell about themselves, and the ways in which they are able to be heard, acknowledged and understood. Alice, for example, describes herself in a mixture of the third person and first person as:

> a peculiar girl, I mean look at her. She's got make up put on with a trowel, and it's really quite strange. I mean, I can be Alice without all of that, but I can't go out as Alice, because otherwise you'd look really too weird [...] I'm six foot three, and sort of seventeen stone, and who am I kidding?

She experiences in the present a disorienting rupture or split between her two selves: her life as Alice, and her life in the body and gender she was born into, and still lives in for the majority of the time, in her role as married father and grandfather, Alex. Alex, she tells me, is a "right-wing. Homophobic. Slightly racist. Dogmatic. Angry. Bloke."

> I've got these two parts of my life, and because they don't actually co-exist terribly satisfactorily. [...] I wonder [...] how the, this interview would have gone if it had been with Alex. Because I'm not entirely convinced I have access to all

> of the feelings across people, it's a bit, not schizophrenic, because that's the wrong description, but it's, a bit separate.

Listening to Alice's life-story provides context for this polarisation, and reveals these two opposing positions as ones she has inhabited with increasing entrenchment as time has gone on. As a "very young person", Alice describes how she would "go into space and become a girl, and nobody's there, so nobody can see me". As she progresses into adolescence, these discontinuities and disjunctures become more apparent, less private, as her narrative begins to bow and warp alarmingly. At boarding school, she tells me, "everybody calls me Linda. I walk down a corridor and they shout Linda at me." "I think I can remember the little boy reading these books," she tells me, "whereas I can't really remember myself, I feel completely alien, I mean I see pictures of myself at this boarding school and it looks like some alien person". Jo, on the other hand, knits her pre- and post-transition life together very consciously from the start of our conversation. Growing up in the 1950s was a "difficult time to be a trans girl"; and yet she later comments that "I was a just a young boy [...] I was a very pretty boy". In later life, she is "dad" to her two daughters, but "Grandma to my grandson". As she puts it, "when I told my daughters that I was going to have to transition, I couldn't bear going on living as a man, I said to them, whatever happens, I'll always love you, and I will always be your dad". She proudly recounts how her daughter "wrote an article for Look magazine, it was over two pages. It said 'my dad is the most inspiring woman that I know'. It's brilliant. It's brilliant. Yeah, that's, that's fab". Jo is not rescripting the past, to adopt Lavery's term, but allowing for differing realities and 'tenses' to co-exist. What she 'is' and what she 'was', in Lavery's phrase, "slip and slide, forward and backward in time" (@gracelavery).

In the oral histories I have gathered, therefore, time becomes apparent as something malleable, mobile and multidirectional. It has alternating flows. It has gaps. Time is, as Christina Lupton puts it, "an ongoing axis of struggle and possibility: one

along which our relationships to each other, to the world, and to objects and our labor are arranged and spaced out and joined up, often with elasticity and creativity" (2). My narrators' diverse accounts of the workings of time in their own lives helps to illuminate Lupton's point. Chronology is seen to be only one way of ordering events, memories and feelings; moreover, it is one that is often strikingly inadequate to queer demands or needs. As I have shown here, through analysis of my narrators' accounts, time's loops, snags, frays, breaks and multiple possibilities are made apparent through listening to queer oral histories. I now go on to show how these possibilities play out in queer oral histories of *reading*, especially. Valerie Rohy notes that Stephen Gordon, the 'invert' protagonist of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), "attains queer subjectivity" through reading – specifically Havelock Ellis's sexology texts – and through reading, "comes to be what she will thereafter have always been" (106). Both LGBTQ lives, and experiences with books and reading, demand that we conceive of and get to grips with time as unfurling forwards and backwards, and, to adapt Stockton's phrase, "twist[ing] sideways", in new and sometimes challenging formulations.

The protoqueer child in time

The intersection of queerness, childhood, reading and the book is a delicate issue to research and write about. Much of this anxiety centres on the figure of the child. To bring "queer" and "the child" into proximity, is, Michael Cobb asserts, "not only difficult, but […] dangerous" (120). As Eric Tribunella notes, the mobilisation of the symbolic 'child' to stand for reproduction, species survival and the (hetero)sexual norm, usually by regressive and LGBTQ-hostile forces, positions "gender-variant and (proto)gay children" as at risk, often, of "intense rhetorical and physical violence" (708). Moreover, there is often scant discursive space in heteronormative environments to consider such a child at all, queerness tending to be something fully understood as such only from the vantage point of adulthood. The child that Sedgwick names as "proto-gay",

therefore, is a version of the child who is for the most part culturally and socially unseen and unheard, unless in retrospect (91). Stockton fruitfully theorises this retroactive construction, proposing that the protoqueer child remains wholly "unavailable to itself in the present tense" (6). To consider the queer child thus produces, according to Rohy, a kind of "temporal incoherence" (52). The "desires" of this child, Gabrielle Owen writes, in response to Stockton, are "still unthinkable, or only available retrospectively, in our language or representations" (102). The Australian writer and broadcaster Robert Dessaix shares a compelling example of this in his memoir *What Days Are For* (2014), when he asserts that "Enid Blyton and *Five on Kirrin Island Again* in particular, shaped me in a way no other writer or book ever did" (n. pag.). Given prevailing critical opinions of Blyton as "snobbish, sexist, racist, colonialist, and so on", it is a provocative admission – as Dessaix no doubt intends (Rudd 2-3). "Blyton", he continues, "moulded my imagination in more profound ways than either Shakespeare or Gogol" (n. pag). Dessaix attributes this formative, "profound" reading experience to what he terms Blyton's "unusual gendering", "although", he admits – and this is crucial – "I wouldn't have known, as a child, what to call it" (n. pag.). Musing on the series' characters, Dessaix notes that he was "always rather taken with Julian", whom he describes as "willowy yet manly", "good-natured but firm", with "marvellously determined eyes and a strong chin", comparing him favourably with his real-life partner, Peter (n. pag.). Julian's "cousin George" is recalled, in equally admiring terms, as "such a bossy girl, the real boy of the group ('a son to be proud of', somebody says of her)" (n. pag.). It is a minor character named Martin, however – a sixteen-year-old neighbour who appears only in this particular instalment of the *Famous Five* books – who made "quite an impression on" the young Dessaix. Men, as Dessaix notes, "are meant to enjoy doing things [...] – golf clubs, for instance, or outboard motors" rather than "appreciating things of beauty for their own sake" (n. pag.). Martin "is a boy",

Dessaix observes, "but isn't like that at all" (n. pag.). A "sulky loner […] artistic and apt to sob", Martin is, Dessaix comments, "just like me, really" (n. pag.).

The reader of Dessaix's memoir must implicitly acknowledge and understand what it might mean to be "a boy" but not one "like that"; and crucially what it might, to use Solomon's term, "portend". Dessaix retrieves these felt impressions from his memories of childhood reading, and in maturity organises them around an understanding of gender and sexuality. He reads Blyton back through his adult understanding of these concepts, and can now recognise his childhood attractions and frissons for what they reveal about his adult identity. Sexuality is nowhere mentioned explicitly, but is to be inferred by Dessaix's reader just as he infers it from Blyton. This kind of recognition, of something understood but not fully articulated – or, quite yet, articulable – at the original time of reading is a motif that repeats again and again in LGBTQ reading histories. Recalling their reading child-selves, my narrators do indeed seem to have been, as Stockton claims, somewhat "unavailable" to themselves "in the present tense" of their childhood. But this childhood "present tense", it turns out, is peculiarly slippery. Moreover, of course, it is now beyond their grasp; it is now past. How do my narrators' remembered experiences of books and reading help demonstrate how they have negotiated these tricky temporalities, how other experiences of and with narrative have shaped their own life-stories?

My narrators often identified with protagonists for whom the progression into adulthood is not straightforward. Kate, talking about Ruby Ferguson's *Jill* series, discussed previously in terms of the competing constructions of girlhood in its text and illustrations (and their impact on Kate's own formative ideas of sexuality and gender identity), notes that although these novels' action "did seem to happen in real time", Jill "wasn't really growing up, or moving towards adulthood as far as I could see". Two time signatures pull against each other, in Kate's retelling; while "maybe [Jill's] life was progressing" there is only a "vague sense that she was aging a bit". For Kate, who felt a

certain affinity with the character of Jill – her lack of attention to her appearance, her scathing dismissal of the traditionally feminine – the disruption of gender norms and temporal norms are aligned. Kate recounts that Jill's mother "wants her to go to finishing school" to "do something which is acceptable to girls […] to get a job in an office or as a secretary, presumably […] while she waits for her husband to come along". Jill, however, "has different ideas, and can't think of anything worse than giving up her horses and going to secretarial college". Growing up here implies a growing into a stereotypically feminine role and into compulsory heterosexuality. Jill is, as a result, "at a loss", as Kate puts it; stalled, she "can't think of how to […] become an adult". In Kate's reading, Jill finds a certain agency and autonomy as she moves towards independent adulthood:

> she makes contact with some horse-riding aristocrat who's got a, you know, big stable somewhere, and invites her to do a bit of work experience, I think, and not only does she see that she can have a career doing what it is that she really likes, so she's kind of thinking about what she's going to do after she leaves school and becomes an adult, but [...] she has a conversation with some boy, who works at the stables [...] there's a kind of vague signalling that she's entering adulthood and sexual maturity.

And yet, it is (as envisaged by Kate) a distinctly queer future. Although "she has kind of heterosexual leanings" this aspect of the plot is, Kate says, "a bit perfunctory". Jill "thinks that he's nice because he's not like normal boys". What's more, Kate elaborates, "there's no sign that she's anywhere near as excited about meeting this boy as she is about meeting all these new horses." Heterosexuality is thereby deferred, both for Jill and for the reader.

Perhaps no other text that surfaced during my several hours of conversation with these ten individuals exemplified the "temporal incoherence" of the protoqueer child quite as clearly as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), and specifically, the character of Jo March – both in terms of her characterisation within the novel itself and in terms of my narrators' layered relationship with her. "For generations" of readers,

writes Anne Boyd Rioux, the "iconoclastic" Jo was a "beacon to girls who didn't aspire to the feminine ideal", providing "an alternative path to maturity that could combine love and vocation" (n. pag.). For Carol, there is a passionate identification *with* Jo, and, in recollection and rereading, an equally passionate identification *of* her as a lesbian character. "She's a terrible dyke", says Carol, admiringly. "[B]latantly butch"; "inspirational and amazing". On rereading, it is this question of recognition that so agitates Carol: "I don't know what the word is. Shocking. Astounding", she declares. "Like why doesn't anybody, why does no-one notice this? [...] And how it got published at that time, that era, in that world", she continues, "my lord." In identifying what she refers to as "the really blatant dyke bits" of Jo's characterisation, Carol draws on established stereotypes of lesbian behaviour: on "literally page two, right, literally page two", she tells me, "she was already, kind of, you know, lying on the rug, rather than sitting in a nice chair". In Rioux's words, Jo – like my narrator Amy – wishes "she didn't have to grow into a woman at all" (n. pag.). While once this may have been positioned as a rejection of social norms and the expected role of a woman – as wife, housekeeper, mother, as subordinated, domesticated, confined – "grow[ing] into a woman" is, for many readers today, explicitly connected to questions of biology, of sex and gender presentation. Rioux turns to "our current moment": for twenty-first century readers, Rioux argues, Jo is "a potent model of gender fluidity and resistance to heteronormativity" (n. pag.). Although Jo March negotiates her entrance to maturity in an unconventional way, she nevertheless does marry: a Professor Bhaer, a German teacher some decades older than her. For Carol, this was treachery: "How could you let us down?" she asks, where 'us' is clearly implied as an imagined community of lesbian readers or proto-lesbian child readers. "I do remember that's exactly what I felt", Carol reflects: "How could you let us down?". "You can write that down", she tells me. At some level, then, Carol too wished not just to defer but to reroute Jo's entry into heterosexual adulthood – and, by extension, perhaps this was an early

acknowledgement of her own desire to avoid taking a conventional heterosexual life-path.

There is often something anachronistic about my narrators' reading: an unexpected identification with adults while still a child, or a return to child characters in later adolescence or adulthood. "The main reason *Alice in Wonderland* is good", Andy tells me, "is that it's not very much about Alice, it's about all these characters around her, who are all adults". The books that "stuck with" him "weren't actually about children":

> *The Wind in the Willows* is not about children. It's about people with animal heads, but [...] they are adults, they are grown-ups in the world in which they live, they're not children. Whereas Christopher Robin, Christopher Robin was a child, the sort of child who was beaten up at my school.

Andy's observations about *The Wind in the Willows* are perceptive; as Peter Hunt puts it in *The Making of the Wind in the Willows* (2018), Grahame's novel is "not a children's book at all – neither the author nor the original publishers ever suggested that it was. Nor is it an animal story" (9). Instead, Hunt suggests, it is "an adult's book that can be read by children" (16). It is perhaps unusual, however, to find a reader identifying – and identifying with – these age-related anomalies from childhood onwards. For Andy, there is a connection between his emerging sexuality and his unorthodox relationship to conventional age-related behaviours and appearance. As a child, Andy tells me that he "didn't much enjoy being treated as a kid" and that he "enjoyed the company of adults more than I enjoyed the company of children". "I wore suits and bow-ties from a young age," Andy explains, "I dressed in an older way [...] I aspired to look older than I was". Childhood for Andy, was implicated in the kind of inexorable progression-towards-heterosexuality noted by queer theorists such as Steven Bruhm, Natasha Hurley and Tison Pugh, as outlined in the Introduction to this thesis. "My outsiderliness", he tells me, was not positively "to do with [...] gay sexuality, as as much as being quite clear that the kind of heterosexuality that my peers were into was not

for me". And while he "wasn't quite sure what was" for him, he "knew that [heterosexuality] clearly wasn't it". In seeking to differentiate himself from the perceived 'straightness' of his peers, Andy sought to extricate himself from other norms of childhood. While not framing his engagement with *The Wind in the Willows* in childhood as a queer interpretation or a queer reading, Andy nevertheless responded to an aspect of this text – its destabilisation, or 'queering', of the categories of adult/children's book, adult/child character – that resonated with his own sense of himself as not-straight and as outside of the mainstream.

"I was reading these books when I was maybe seven or eight," Kate tells me, of Ruby Ferguson's *Jill* books. Then, later, "I'm not sure actually, when I said that I thought, was I older?" she asks. "I mean", Kate says of her enjoyment of Ferguson's stories, "maybe it sort of went on for a few years". Kate explains that she "started reading proper books" but that she "was still reading Enid Blytons as well":

> I read my way through the whole *Malory Towers* and *Famous Five* and I'm pretty sure I was doing that until I was, maybe I stopped when I was at secondary school, I'm not sure, I think maybe I didn't, I think maybe I carried on, but I was doing that in parallel with I think, I dunno.

Alison Hennegan has written of her own teenage experiences of reading and rereading Enid Blyton and other school stories. "Like the good parent she was and is", she writes, "my mother was worried to find the sixteen-year-old me still reading Enid Blyton's Malory Towers books. (I was also reading Dostoevsky, Stendhal and Flaubert, but still …)" (175). Hennegan suggests that such recollections may be more common among proto-lesbian readers:

> Recently browsing once more through Sheila Ray's *The Blyton Phenomenon* I noted that reading surveys carried out amongst schoolchildren reveal that it is those girls who are academic high flyers who go on reading Enid Blyton's school stories longest. The surveyors were surprised. I'm not. Schoolgirls who spend long hours in their bedrooms reading books are often schoolgirls who are desperately trying to escape from schoolboys and there's many a baby dyke amongst them. (175-76)

This may be an anecdotal claim, but it's a relatively common one, corroborated by Rosemary Auchmuty, for example, in her 1992 study *The World of Girls*. For Auchmuty, reading school stories as a young woman provided a "temporary escape and refuge from the pressures of that profoundly heterosexual society [she] lived in" (205). "Growing up," writes Auchmuty, echoing Hennegan, "is rarely easy for girls" (205). These books provided necessary sanctuary and retreat, even if, as Auchmuty notes, "it took [her] years to recognise and identify" their full appeal to her protolesbian self (2-3).

Kate's retelling of her own version of this reading experience bears scrutiny. She recalls that she "read [her] way through" not just one or two but "the whole" series of "*Malory Towers*" and the "*Famous Five*". It is as her reading memories give way to, or intersect with, her memories of growing up that her syntax stumbles and becomes provisional and uncertain: "I'm pretty sure", "maybe I stopped", 'I'm not sure", "maybe I didn't". The forthright narrative drive of reading her way through entire series collapses under a slew of qualifications. She is "doing that" – reading – "until I was" – she trails off. She establishes in these few faltering sentences multiple temporal modes: "doing", "stopped", "carried on", "in parallel", but these are stippled with hesitancies: "I think maybe", "I think, I dunno". Finally, unable to effectively control her own reading history, to marshal it into an easy linear progression from Ferguson to Blyton to "proper books", she loops back, bringing these "proper books" – literary classics – back into intriguing relation with her younger, pony- and school-story reading self: "I remember I read *Jane Eyre* when I was, maybe that was about nine or ten", she finishes. Like Hennegan, and like Solomon, Kate seems to find the progression into and through puberty fraught. She is using books and reading at once to make sense of and to escape from something – emerging sexuality – that, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, is both compelling, but also often also a source of confusion. "I find it really difficult to date all these things now", responds Kate, in answer to my continued probing of her

pre-adolescent reading processes and practices, "and to remember what came before and what came afterwards". 'Before' and 'afterwards' here refer not to a coming out or coming to terms with lesbian identity, as in Amy's account. Rather, she is voicing the difficulty of trying to order memory into a simple, sequential narrative. Her reading memories, to use Lupton's phrase, "cut and complicate" time (9). They resist linearity. And although Kate is clear that, as an adult, she identifies as "gay, or even lesbian […] I don't choose to call myself queer" – she particularly likes the term lesbian, she qualifies, drily, "because it's more old school, it's more to do with cats and waterproof clothing" – I am suggesting that, in their asynchrony, there is something exuberantly, defiantly queer about these reading recollections. Disrupting an expected developmental trajectory, in which Blyton and school stories give way to 'proper books', they subvert the norms of chrononormative age-related progression.

Sometimes my narrators read or reflect on their childhood reading in the adult present in a way unavailable to them previously, and it is then that their protoqueer child-self is made most 'available'. Mary, for example, describes an adolescent shame at her childhood reading choices. "When I was older, I felt really guilty about having enjoyed *Little Women* and the *Chalet School* and books like that, so much", she tells me. "I felt really, really embarrassed about having spent my childhood loving [...] books that were called *Little Women* and *Good Wives*." It was only at the point that she began to search out books with explicitly lesbian content that "I looked back on some of my childhood reading and sort of started to understand that my interest in female protagonists, girls, being on their own, in boarding schools, all of this kind of stuff, maybe had a different colour to it". It is a repositioning of childhood and adolescent reading that works retroactively, not only on her "interest in female protagonists" in later childhood, but to encompass her interest in narratives of gay male sexuality, such as Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) – incidentally, one of the few reading

experiences she didn't share with her teenage close female friendship group – as well as to re-evaluate even earlier narrative pleasures:

> yes, I understand now, that's why I was drawn to being interested in those kind of characters or those kind of books, and I also would say that I think it's also why I was drawn in a particular way to the Jo Marches of this world, and the Jos of the Chalet School, and I would also see for example some of the stuff like, for example, the female teachers in a boarding school, I mean, come on. Do you know what I mean? Things like that. The Four Marys in the comic books, I absolutely would look back on it now and go yes, that's where your, that there was something going on that you just didn't realise.

As discussed throughout these oral histories, Mary's rhetorical move here – "Do you know what I mean?" – pushes the explicit acknowledgment of lesbian sexuality into the realm of the intersubjective relationship between myself as researcher, and Mary as narrator. I do 'know what she means', or is inferring, by her mention of "female teachers in a boarding school", just as she expects me to. She shies away, even in adulthood, of ascribing childhood *desire* as such, to her reading of these characters – "that's where your" is as far as she goes, leaving a lacuna which supplies various possible options: 'where your interest lies', perhaps, or even 'your passion'. However, there was "something going on", which in adulthood she is able to recognise and articulate. This is a version, perhaps, of the 'flash of recognition' discussed in the previous chapter, but one that involves a more complicated temporality. It is a mode recognised by other of my narrators, also. Julia comments on Blyton's George Kirrin that "as an adult, looking back [...] she's a very queer character in children's literature. And, you know, you don't know why you're quite so excited when you're reading about George in *Famous Five* books, but now I know why." Carol reports something along similar lines, explaining that "if you entered my bedroom and I started looking at books I would say, yeah, oh yeah, obviously she was, but, you know, I never thought of it at the time, kind of thing, yeah? [...] If I'd stumbled across in adulthood, I probably would have thought, oh god, yeah, of course they're lesbians, right? Although it wasn't obvious at the time, certainly not in childhood or teenagedom." Kate suggests that those

characters or episodes that, in childhood, were "memorable", or "stuck with" her for reasons she was, at the time, unable to perceive or articulate, now in adulthood seem to reflect something nascently queer. "I didn't really understand what that was about at the time", Kate explains. Now, however, "it seems [...] that this character appealed to me because they were looking for their, you know, they couldn't quite fit in or they couldn't make sense of their own identity". Her answer points to specific examples that surfaced through our conversations, some of which have been encountered in these pages so far – the "deep shame" experienced by the girl in the 1950s autobiographical narrative discussed in Chapter Two, the disjuncture between the textual and illustrated Jill, discussed in Chapter Three. Kate posits that in "look[ing] back", as a result of our conversation, she is "putting a queer spin" on various reading memories, "queering these texts and queering these characters".

For Mary, Julia, Carol and Kate, these reflections on reading are prompted by the interview process. It is in the example of rereading unfolding over a lifetime, however, that a richer picture emerges. Andy provides an example of the ways in which readers might use books to mark, map and document time from childhood into adolescence, and through into adulthood. Books are figured by Andy as things that *use* time, productively, or otherwise. Andy reread "even from an early age". He mentions that he "found some diaries, one diary from when I was fourteen years old, and I said, oh, [...] it's the time of year I'm going to reread Wind in the Willows". This reading record was logged both extratextually, in his diary, and folded into his experience of re-encountering the material book itself: "I got a lot of pleasure out of revisiting books and rereading them, more than once," he comments, and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) was one such book. Grahame's tale of Mole and Ratty "messing about in boats" and adventuring with their friends Mr Toad and Badger has "stuck" with Andy, he explains, for several reasons (12). Partly, it is a book that is embedded in childhood memories of being read to, and, later, of reading it aloud to his younger

sister, and of his first encounters with it on his parents' bookshelves. It is also, as he states, "a very well-written book". "I enjoyed reading it," he tells me. "I enjoyed the flow of the words, I enjoyed the story." The book's continued resonance is more deeply felt, however. As mentioned, Andy is clear, with Hunt, that *The Wind in the Willows* is not about children, nor are its characters animals, but hybrid "people with animal heads" who are adults within the world of the story. The novel thereby puts forward, for Andy, a vision of the future, of an adulthood he both wants to participate in and can imagine himself participating in – a world-expanding possibility for his child-self. In our first interview, Andy elaborates on the book's significance for his younger self:

> the life that these people were living, these creatures were living on the riverbank, it seemed quite idyllic. They didn't have to earn any money, [...] they didn't have to do things, they just did the things they wanted to do. And they had some adventures and they had some threats, and they coped with those things [...] the kind of world that, that, er, Badger and um, Ratty and Mole lived in, just seemed to be a nice world to be in [...] there was a sense of kind of, community there.

As Andy states repeatedly throughout both our interviews, he felt very much an outsider for much of his childhood; the futurity and community offered by Grahame's novel stands as a vision of radical hope.

For Andy, the book becomes a vital record not only of time passing, but of his changing perspectives on both the book and on his own life. Andy "picked up" on the homosocial resonances of Grahame's novel, particularly the close friendship between Mole and Ratty, "unconscious[ly]". It was, he explains, "a homosociality that I didn't really understand, because I was a lot younger". "Looking back on it", Andy reflects in our first interview, "I guess there might have been something [...] there was something very male about the environment of Wind in the Willows". It was a "very male environment, a very convivial sort of club-like environment", and one that seemed "very comfortable" to his child-self. Kathryn Hughes, in a review of Hunt's book, has also foregrounded the curiously unchildlike atmosphere of the riverbank. Toad, Ratty,

Mole and Badger are "grown men", states Hughes; the "rich and leisured" members of an Edwardian gentleman's club (n. pag.). "[R]eading it at different ages", the novel therefore "came to acquire levels of meaning and significance that were different to what it had originally, different layers [...] tied into experiences I was having", Andy explains. When we meet to discuss the book for our second interview, Andy provides a compelling reading of Grahame's novel as no less than a queer love story. On their first encounter, Mole is "enraptured, bewitched'" with Ratty, he comments; they're "almost starting to cruise each other", Andy remarks.

Indeed, reading *The Wind in the Willows* with queer, adult eye, Andy's interpretation is persuasive. Here are the Mole and the Rat encountering each other for the first time:

> A brown little face, with whiskers.
> A grave round face with the same twinkle in its eye that had first attracted his notice.
> Small neat ears and thick silky hair.
> It was the Water Rat!
> Then the two animals stood and regarded each other cautiously
> "Hullo, Mole!" said the Water Rat.
> "Hullo, Rat!" said the Mole.
> "Would you like to come over?" (11)

Mole is "in ecstasies", "intoxicated", "[a]bsorbed in the new life he was entering upon" (13-14). Later, Andy notes:

> there's a section where [...], Toad puts them in a room in Toad Hall, in this magnificent house. 'The Mole reached out from under his blanket, felt for the Rat's paw in the darkness and gave it a squeeze. "I'll do whatever you like, Ratty", he whispered. "Shall we run away tomorrow morning, quite early, very early, and go back to our dear old hole in the river?'"

Andy is struck, in adulthood, by the "give and take in that relationship" and the intimacy of their life together. He comments, too, on the episode in which Ratty, beguiled by a visiting Sea Rat, is tempted to leave Mole and their life together. "[T]he Mole stops him", Andy explains. He "really confronts him" – again, Andy quotes a passage at length, in which Mole intervenes to prevent the Water Rat's departure:

"'[g]rappling with him very strongly, he dragged him aside and threw him down and held him'". There is, Andy comments, "something quite sensual about that" – Mole "physically holds him down to the floor until he gets back to normal and he bursts into tears". It is "a very poignant moment" which brings "a kind of equality into their relationship" that Andy "hadn't really appreciated before", in previous readings. Hunt puts forward a similar speculative reading in his 2010 introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel. Commenting on the absence of women throughout the book, its foregrounding of "male bonding, not to say homoeroticism", Grahame's "preference for male company and (it is deduced) sexually unsuccessful marriage", Hunt ponders whether there are grounds for reading *The Wind in the Willows* as "a wry and sly gay manifesto" (xxx). But it is a reading he fails to pursue with any real conviction – at least in print. Despite the confected media coverage surrounding the publication of Hunt's 2018 book about Grahame, the 'making' of the novel and its afterlives – "Leave Ratty and Moley alone" (*The Daily Telegraph*); "I'll do whatever you like, Ratty" (*The Daily Mail*) – a certain squeamishness seems to persist in putting forward a critical reappraisal of *The Wind in the Willows* as a queer text (Dunn n. pag.; Ardehali n. pag.). As Hughes points out, despite "trenchantly" suggesting this possibility in publicity interviews, only "odd little hints'" remain in Hunt's history of the novel (n. pag.). The oral history offered by Andy, however, sets *The Wind in the Willows* carefully, seriously, in the canon of gay literature.

Carol offers a counter example of revisiting a text at a different life stage. For Carol, Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872) did not so much come to "acquire levels of meaning", as Andy found with Grahame, but rather, discard them. In our first conversation, Carol energetically recounts that she "loved *What Katy Did*, absolutely loved it, loved it, loved it". Coolidge's tale of nineteenth-century American girlhood first emerges in our conversation in the context of the books of her late childhood and early teenage years. Thinking through the "girl characters" that she "strongly identified

with", Carol mentions various comic book characters – the Four Marys, Bunty, Minnie the Minx, a "really strong girl" in the *Bash Street Kids* – and Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers*, which she "used to absolutely love [...] 'cos they were all girls". She segues briefly into "more sexualised literature", about "these girls at boarding school again", before returning to the Bobbsey Twins: "I kind of hated them", she explains, "but I liked reading them [...] 'cos the girl did all these butch things". Carol "liked it because I like the girl", she tells me; "the other girl" she "used to like" was Katy Carr, Coolidge's eponymous heroine, describing her as "a very good role model". Katy, therefore, inhabits a remembered reading landscape populated with strong girl characters, semi-sexualised (boarding school, butchness), occupying a position somewhere between the identified-with and the desired. Carol goes on to state of Katy, that "for some reason, somehow, she became one of my sexual fantasies, in some form":

> I don't know why, because I can't remember anything that ever happened in it, that would have done that. But it was a very, very formative [...] *What Katy Did* was definitely part of sexual fantasy, so she must have done something for me somewhere, I dunno! [...] I really remember nothing other than she was swinging and fell off the swing and broke her leg or got paralysed or got something wrong with her.

Later in our conversation, I returned with Carol to this topic. Katy, she explains, "was quite a late addition to my sexual fantasy library. Um, and I think I was surprised when she emerged, and kind of looked at it, and thought about it." Reflecting on the lack of obvious impetus for such a response to the text, Carol reflects that: "I think it's a good thing, that those girl characters were not sexualised at all. [...] But I think you draw what you draw from how you draw it which is why Katy was a very late addition to the, to the video library, really". This suggests a considered engagement with the erotic potential of the text, of Katy as a character; even a kind of queering, although Carol had no acknowledged framework with which to articulate her emergent lesbian identity at the time. As she also stated in the same interview, "I didn't identify as a lesbian, apart

from one little fleeting moment, which was the summer of my A levels [...] I had no thoughts, no identity as lesbian, really".

In adulthood, however, having reread *What Katy Did at School* (1873) for our second conversation, Carol had a somewhat different response to Katy as a character, and the novel sequence itself. "I do not understand why I was so into *What Katy Did,* it's so fucking boring!", she announces. "I was deeply, deeply, deeply disappointed. And bored," she elaborates, "I've wasted two days". Expecting, as discussed, to find that "there was something vaguely sexual about it", Carol read the novel "thinking, where's the sexual bit, must be the next bit [...] I've almost searched the pages looking for it". Carol's rereading experience *wastes* time, both in terms of taking it up, and in fast-forwarding it. She "sped-read it mainly because it was boring", she tells me, adding "I didn't speed-read it enough to speed-read through what might have been the sexual bit." Her "overwhelming feeling was that of dire disappointment" at this mysterious lack in the novel. She felt cheated out of an opportunity to connect with her childhood self. "Given that particular sexual fantasy is no longer in my kind of radar of sexual fantasies, really, hasn't been for years, decades,", she comments, "I was quite interested to kind of relook at it." Instead, the rereading experience became "a chore": "oh my god, got to read fucking Katy, right," she recounts in our second interview, describing the experience of rereading. "By the time it got to today, I'd almost rather take the rubbish out than read Katy [...] I didn't want to do it. [...] I was so fucking disappointed with bloody Katy. She's really, really, really disappointed me."

As I have argued elsewhere in *Textual Preferences*, boredom functions as something of an alert system, to signal something else, in these oral histories of reading – even as a kind of 'gaydar'. Whereas for Kate, boredom as an affective response prompted the uncovering of a hidden gay history within Gavin Maxwell's memoir, for Carol, it is almost the reverse: boredom now masks what she previously identified as the queer potential of Coolidge's novel. The specific associations and meanings that

Carol *remembered* finding in *What Katy Did*, however, nevertheless usefully shed light on her changing self-conception over time. Her protoqueer child-self emerges forcefully in the course of our conversation, as a lone reading figure abandoned by her adult self, paradoxically *because* as an adult Carol can no longer find echoes or resonances of the queer undercurrent she had formerly detected in the novel. She remains at a loss to explain her childhood response: "I thought, what the fuck are you on? [...] I just thought, this is a load of fucking pious Christian middle-class prats, basically. And why did I love it so much?" Her adult analysis is that she "had some weird thing about some kind of sexual connotation", about which "clearly [she] was wrong". When I asked about other characters she had previously identified with or expressed affiliation with in terms of gender presentation or sexuality, she is adamant that there might be "a kind of archetype, that you could bring in to apply to people like Jo [March, from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*], but not Katy. Bloody hell [...] I tell you, what a waste of time."

In adulthood, Carol's lesbian subjectivity is well established. Indeed, in contrast to several other of my narrators, she interjects her lesbian identity into the interview, independently, rather than allowing it to be elided unless directly asked to define it. At the start of both our interviews, for example, she interrupts the conventional opening to an oral history interview, a statement by the interviewer which establishes the participants, date, time, location and subject matter of the conversation to come. My interviews with Carol took place at her home in North London. The area in which Carol lives, Stoke Newington, happens to be one anecdotally associated with lesbians in the popular imagination. In both interviews, Carol interrupts me at my mention of London – before I have asked the first question – to locate us specifically in "Stoke Newington, lesbian paradise!" Inhabiting so fully her outward, lived lesbian identity, I suggest that in adulthood Carol no longer needs the fantasy offered by Coolidge's novel. While Andy presents an elastic, capacious continuum of child-to-adult rereadings of *The Wind in the*

Willows, in which the book itself becomes folded into his enlarged conception and acceptance of himself as a gay man, with gay community, Carol's reading of *What Katy Did* foregrounds discontinuity from childhood to adulthood. She rejects Katy Carr as a previously necessary imaginative crutch, disavowing her desiring child-self as having shamefully found much-needed (erotic) stimulus, reflection or recognition in a source no longer deemed adequate to provide it. In both accounts, however, there is a constitution, stabilisation and reinforcement of adult queer subjectivity. "Reworking one's position as reader of a certain text", Lupton suggests, "becomes a way of recouping time as life and discontinuity as critical maturity" (65). In this way, readings over time can help to bind the self into new coherence.

As well as reworking a reader's position on a text, rereading can facilitate a reworking of the past; an attempted reconciliation with or rehabilitation of it. Alice, for example, comments that rereading Enid Blyton's *Five on a Treasure Island* (1942) and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) for our second conversation have the effect of "bringing back to me the childhood that I was meant to be in. I mean, you know, that's what it's meant to be like, this, these manuals, I mean, even in the Enid Blyton [...] Make some cakes [...] dad's busy. Keep quiet". Sedgwick asserts in her essay "Queerer than Fiction" – later to become the introduction to her edited collection *Novel Gazing* – that there is a kind of reading which gives the reader "room to realize that the future may be different from the present" (279). The oral history interview, which, in retelling earlier episodes, dwells so much in various versions of the past, oddly positions the vantage point from which Alice is talking to me in the present as a kind of 'future', as it relates to the Alice who is conjured for the majority of the interview. In other words, talking of the "little boy reading these books" to Alice, a 64-year-old transwoman, clearly demonstrates the ways in which "the future may be different". Having access to this 'room to realise', however, opens up for Alice what Sedgwick terms the equally, perhaps *more* "profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities that the past [...]

could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (279). Alice comments that "I guess that I would have liked to have remembered something better. Um, but that's the whole thing, isn't it. Course I would have liked to have remembered something better because I would have liked to have been better." As Lupton writes, "we read in the interstices of time that grammar can help flag, in the future anterior, in time opened up by contingency as an awareness of what could have been otherwise" (12). In rereading, Alice is able to re-encounter something of the childhood that she initially experienced only through reading and in her experiences with books.

This "time opened up by contingency" can, at its furthest limits, produce a fantasised reading history predicated on queer association between texts and between characters, and not, in fact, on reading at all. Eileen is "astounded at the number of parallels" she can draw as an adult rereader, between her own teenage self and Alcott's Jo March. She recalls Jo "running off to read books and crying […] at something called *The Heir of Redcliffe Hall*, and […] and I, er, can't remember why but I was thinking about Radclyffe, um, Hall, who was the authoress of whatever it was, *The Well of Unhappiness*, I think". She continues: "the fact that I went on to have feelings for women, to love them […] that would have been a wonderful book for me to have read. Wished to hell I had, if I didn't." While real-life accounts of reading Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* abound in lesbian histories of reading, engagements with the read book are rarely so positive. In Jane Traies's oral history study on the lives of older lesbians, for example, she interviews Sylvia, born in Essex in 1942, who recalls: "My dad had spoken about a book called *The Well of Loneliness*, which I read, avidly. I confided to a friend that I thought that I was like this person. My friend was horrified and said "you must never say that" – so I didn't, in fact I didn't even dare think it anymore" (309). In Amy Tooth Murphy's oral history of interwar lesbian life and literature, she interviews Mira, who comments that it is a novel "to slit your wrists with"; Betty "read *The Well of Loneliness*, which I thought was *ghastly*. *So* depressing

and frightful!" (9). Eileen, in contrast, speculates about a reading that she may, in all probability – particularly given her unintentionally funny mangling of its title – never have undertaken, but that "would have been wonderful". For Eileen, then, *The Well of Loneliness* is what Sedgwick refers to in an article for *South Atlantic Quarterly* on reading and rereading Melanie Klein, and adjacent psychoanalytic texts, as a "fantasy book" (625). These are "the books we know about – from their titles, from reading reviews, or hearing people talk about them – but haven't, over a period of time, actually read", the "few special titles that persist as objects of speculation, of accumulated reverie", "their titles or their authors' names" regarded as "valued, phantasmatic objects internal to myself" (625). Although Eileen does not explicitly remember reading Hall's novel, the queer genealogy suggested by her associative, leapfrogging alignment of herself, Jo March and Hall's Stephen Gordon offers one example of the ways in which books and reading – even imagined reading – can function as a particular kind of supportive resource. Such books can, Sedgwick asserts, "have a presence, or exert a pressure in our lives and thinking, that may have much or little to do with what's actually inside them" (625). For Eileen, the very existence of Hall's book itself seems to retrospectively authorise her adolescent same-sex attraction. It is in this and other such productive anachronisms offered by remembering reading and rereading that my narrators use reading and books both to reinscribe the past, or to make something legible that could not be properly 'read' previously, and to reach forward into a viable future.

Reading and futurity

So far, this chapter has explored the intersection of a coming-to-knowledge-of or coming-to-terms-with sexual identity and readers' narratives of their lives along temporal lines, as reflected in analysis of their childhood and adolescent reading. Drawing on Lupton, I now want to examine how the codex book itself allows the

reader, as she puts it, "to remake temporal experience creatively" (9). In Chapter One, I briefly discussed this phenomenon with relation to Amy's experience of reading Joanna Trollope's 1989 novel *A Village Affair*, which was, she explains, "a formative book", because it was "there at the beginning" – not of her life, or even of her entry into literacy, but of her life as a lesbian reader. The emergence of self-knowledge concerning sexuality and gender identity can mark such a distinct dividing line that the difference between 'in' and 'out' can even metaphorically reset the clock on an individual's existence, their 'coming out' into queer selfhood marking an entry into the 'real' world, into their 'real' life. Amy, for example, refers to her teenage reading self, as "a baby dyke" – this colloquialism is an interesting marker of the disruptive potential of queerness in relation to chronological age – who was using books as a means of "figuring stuff out". Books and reading are, as this section explores, necessary tools and practices for survival and futurity.

In my first conversation with Jo, a transwoman who came out in middle-age, she describes a scene of reading – not her own, but that of a fellow pupil at her second boarding school, a boy named Bull, who was "bullied horrendously. He really suffered". Although "I don't know what his first name was because we never used first names", the story she recounts is nevertheless peculiarly personal. "I remember him telling me how he had a library card for Bristol Public Library", Jo explains:

> he had a whole stack of books, he would take out six or seven books at a time, the maximum […] they were all open in a heap on his desk, and he would read a chapter from the first one and then the others. He had read everything and anything, and I think that was his way of escaping from the hell the poor love lived in.

It is a striking description of the ways in which a reader might interact with the book as object, as blockade or defence (see Chapter One). These volumes are occupying space ("the maximum"), taking up room in a notable way (as in Chapter Two); they are insistent and clamorous ("anything and everything"). Modelling a specific reading practice – Bull is surrounded by a "whole stack", a "heap" of open books, creating the

kind of paracanon discussed in Chapter Three – they provide conversation and company, refusing a conventional, linear engagement ("he would read a chapter from the first one and then the others"). This dramatises the kind of reading I want to explore here, exemplifying the fertile, cross-pollinatory dialogue between texts, a reading practice that my narrator Andy refers to in our first conversation as "sampling". Lupton comments that this kind of bookish interaction is "reading as opening up new temporal horizons and combinations, because the codex structure lends itself to rearrangement and sampling just as much as to sequence" (94). It is, I argue, a practice with particular significance to the LGBTQ reader. "I did a lot of sampling", Andy explains, "and that was actually a pleasure in itself":

> I'd quite often sit in a library, and read a bit of a book, and see if I liked it. If I liked the style, if I liked the way it was written. And it wouldn't always be [...] the start. It would often be, I'd just pick something at random, and think I'm going to try a few pages and see if I really like that. [...] I would have things in front of me and I'd have to decide which one I was going to take.

"A lot of the books I've read that I'll go back to are books that I've never read all the way through but read bits of," Andy elaborates. Books, Andy asserts, are "things you dip into, go back to and treat in different ways."

At this point I would like to return to the (by now fairly well-worn) example of Amy's reading of Joanna Trollope's *A Village Affair.* Rereading the novel for our second conversation, Amy comments: "I was trying to figure out [...] where [the] book has mostly been opened at, based on the crack in the spine. Um, and there are a couple of bits that I must have read again and again." As discussed in the previous chapters, Amy identified with the character of Clodagh, in particular, and was significantly invested in the (ultimately doomed) relationship between Clodagh and the book's main protagonist, Alice Jordan. Her repeated reading of selected parts of the text – those featuring Alice and Clodagh together, "just them" – is testament to her investment in the emotional and sexual relationship between the two women. Amy "actually hated the end of that book, I really hated it, it made me angry, it made me sad". "I wanted that

central relationship to be the relationship", she tells me. So much so, that, faced with the textual evidence of its inevitable ending, she "just got to the bit that I liked, and then I stopped reading it", she explains – only to then "invent […] a different end" to the novel itself. She is compelled to peruse the same passages over and over in order to defer the novel's ending: "I think I reread that book up to a certain point, many times". More than this, her repeated forays into the text hold open an imaginative space for an alternative version. "I don't know what the hell I expected the different outcome to be", she admits. Nevertheless, she "kept re-reading it and re-reading it and re-reading it", she explains: "I think, somewhere in me, I hoped to find a different end." Trollope's narrative trajectory is therefore forced to take second place to the shape Amy herself imposes on it. As Rebecca O'Rourke puts it, "this reading for whatever we can get from unpromising, often heterosexual or homophobic writers develops early and is then, sadly, often needed in reading our own lesbian tradition: filling in its gaps, imagining the positive outcomes we want" (141-2). "I was so bent on that relationship being the thing that I wanted to be true," Amy explains, that she both physically and metaphorically 'bends' Trollope's narrative into a more narratively satisfying conclusion. "In my head I imagined all kinds of happy ever after", she comments. Lupton elaborates on:

> this possibility of books, and relationships, being read out of order, and back to front, or in parts, or in different combinations. They alert us to the possibilities of events being replayed, or reread, or grasped before they are fully unfolded. The time reading takes seems less linear and less restrictive in these novels when we think of them as things that can be open and closed in different ways [and...] once we see their structures as flexible to different futures and pasts. (95)

Lupton argues that this "alternation and recombination and variations in time" is a particular "property of book use in all its delights and limits" (16). The codex book itself, as a medium, is paramount in her analysis. The replaying, rereading and grasping of events "before they are fully unfolded" seems to me also to be a decidedly queer

reading strategy. This example shows, however, returning to ideas of the "foxed and careworn" book from the first chapter of this thesis, that Amy makes both a cerebral and a very material intervention into the novel's form. She imaginatively reconstructs an alternative ending, while physically creating an alternate, recombined reading: through cracking the spine, through repeated rereading up to a certain point, skipping forward, and reading and rereading the end of the novel. In refusing the page-turn, from the point in Trollope's novel when two women can make a life together to the point that they, decidedly, cannot, Amy is refusing, quite literally, to *unfold* the narrative further. She is *using* the novel for her own ends. Her specific, adolescent copy of *A Village Affair* marks, for Amy, "a moment in time" but it is a product of readerly engagement over time, and is marked by it. As Lupton writes, "reading books in particular has been, and continues to be, a juncture where technical and human agents collaborate fiercely in creating much-desired and nonlinear experiences of time" (3). Reading, according to Lupton, "makes events that have been ordered one way into things that can still be accessed and reordered in time, and that therefore come with a surfeit of possibility that real life lacks" (121). Through material strategies of reading my narrators defer or defy plot; in opening and closing the book at will, they open up new possibilities for plot. The book offers the promise of endless renewal, or renegotiation, that perhaps this time, things will turn out differently. Amy's material engagements with *A Village Affair* can in this way be seen as an attempt to activate this potential.

José Esteban Muñoz connects these ideas of promise, potential and the queer in his work on queer utopia. "The anticipatory illumination of certain objects", he writes in *Cruising Utopia*, "is a kind of potentiality that is open, indeterminate, like the affective contours of hope itself" (7).For Muñoz, the queer future is one predicated on the relational and the social. Using Muñoz, Lupton usefully positions the book as an object of promise, of futurity, and of community. For Muñoz, Lupton writes, "our

orientation toward the as yet unrealized futures is supported by real 'objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise'" (124). Books are at once objects, and also "avatars", symbols of this turning toward "a future in which they already participate" (143). This plays out in my narrators' accounts. My argument here comes full circle, from the first chapter of *Textual Preferences*, which foregrounded the book as object, incorporating also the "promise" identified by Amy as allied to the books in the library van of her childhood; this potential of the book reverberates in my narrators' accounts, shifting and strengthening across the life-course. In some cases, it is richly repaid. Andy's discussion of *The Wind in the Willows*, above, for example, models such queer relationality and future-orientation. Andy notes that the "nice world" that Badger and Ratty and Mole lived in, that he felt so drawn to in childhood, has become embodied in adulthood by his own relationships with his partner and with his brother. "When the three of us are together," he tells me, "it's a bit like *The Wind in the Willows* almost [...] I'm probably the Badger, and they're the Rat and the Mole. [...] it's really nice." *The Wind in the Willows* is the object and "avatar" of this relationality. Andy, in some sense, then, can be seen to have read this future – his future – into becoming.

Andy remarks on the fact that "when you're a child you have a lot of free time". For Andy, this time was spent reading. For Mary, something of this time of childhood was returned to her, in the experience of rereading the three books she chose to revisit for our second interview. She offers a strikingly considered and beautifully articulated account of the process of re-encountering a childhood book, in her discussion of rereading Laura Ingalls Wilder's *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937). "[I]t was like going back into that magic moment of reading a book for the first time", she tells me. Mary mobilises a particular example, that of the moment in Wilder's novel when Laura, disobeying her parents, ventures down to the creek during a storm and is very nearly swept off a wooden bridge into the turbulent waters beneath. As she began to reread this episode, Mary explains, she "remembered very distinctly this little illustration of

this, this rushing water, and this little white face, clinging on to this plank, [...] in this water". In re-encountering this moment in adulthood, the book seems to 'hold' something of her childhood experience. Past and present reading experiences are folded into each other, both metaphorically, and more materially. "[A]bout four pages later I came to it", she explains:

> and it was like a sort of visceral feeling in my chest, that reconnecting to that moment in the book, the excitement of that moment in the book, the [...] danger in the book [...] So that really, kind of took me aback actually. That I still felt the danger for the character. I knew it was going to come but I hadn't really remembered.

The time of reading is future-oriented, regulated and measured out, page by page, and is at once something far more unbounded, with the ability to take the reader "aback"' – a present-tense shock – and also 'back' *into* something she "still felt", a present-perfect positioning. Her interactions with the physical book allow Mary to anticipate, to encounter Laura's brush with death as if for the first time, and to re-experience something she has previously felt:

> I was waiting for the moment but then it was a new moment again. It was really quite a strange experience, actually [...] I really felt the newness of that. Again, because sud-, I, it was new to me. [...] it was a really odd combination of the [...] new and the old embracing each other and anticipation being absolutely fulfilled.

In rereading *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the time of reading enables Mary to 'alternate' between childhood and adulthood, to pick up on Lupton's phrase; tenses emerge in a powerfully "odd combination" from this account, which shows the book's capacity to make time anew. The book is suddenly, as Mary comments, "new to me".

"We make time for books," comments Gill Partington of the double meaning inherent in Lupton's title, *Reading and the Making of Time*, "but they in turn make time for us, generating rhythms that punctuate lives" (n. pag.). It is this capacity of reading and books as able to *create* time that I want to end on. Reflecting more broadly towards the end of our second interview on what this kind of readerly re-encounter might make

possible for the adult reader, Mary emphasises the importance of making time for exactly the kind of revisiting of childhood reading offered by her experience of rereading Wilder's novel. Rereading childhood books is "the kind of thing you always mean to do, but maybe you haven't quite got round to yet,", Mary continues. "[I]t's something you think you'll do in the future maybe when you're retired, or, I don't know, have more time." Books represent this future time to come. They are "conduits", Lupton writes, "for a vision of a more leisurely time [...] one in which they would be accessed democratically and with pleasure" (124). And while books demand time, they also deliver it. "I think if you love to read, at all," Mary tells me, "it's like being given like a little gift, or something, being asked to go and reread." For LGBTQ readers, as *Textual Preferences* has cumulatively aimed to show, books are intimately bound up with our pasts, on an individual, private level, and a broader, more societal one; with our present, and our future. For Andy, reading with and for a "gay sensibility" – he gives the examples of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray (*1891*)*, E.F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* novels (1920-1939), and the homosocial environment conjured by Kenneth Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), as discussed above – allows him to participate in "an ongoing […] queer continuity". As he comments, "there's a community of gay people, but some of them are dead, and some of them haven't been born yet". Books and reading provide an imaginative and material network for that community, that stretches forwards and backwards in time, that holds traces of past readers, incorporates readers in the present, and holds open space for readers in the future. Books unfold time for queer lives to continue.

Conclusion

Lupton suggests that "book reading should be understood in time and as a quality of time use" but that "[h]erein lies the stumbling block for those who study the history of reading in empirical terms, as a reaction of a person to a particular text" (156-57). To

conclude, I argue strongly against this last "stumbling block" – suggesting instead that the reaction of particular people to particular texts (and books) brings out precisely this nuanced understanding of reading in time and the book as an agent of such "time use". Like lived experiences of queerness, reading and books allow the reader to trouble both identity, and time, in deceptively complex ways. Not only does reading allow the reader to try out various subject positions for size, gathering kindred characters or discarding them at will, but it allows for those affiliations and disavowals to be replayed or reversed, in rereading encounters. In this way, oral histories of reading can contribute something slightly other than histories of reading which focus on the marks of use or marginalia of a particular text, or the production or circulation of books, which, as Lupton points out, tend to be "less attentive to reading as something conjugated in time" (15). Lupton remarks that "things like the pace at which a book is read, or the intervals between its readings, are much harder to diagram" than the ways in which a book moves through space – but that reading "spreads out in and defines time just as unevenly and pervasively as it does space" (16). This is part of what the oral history interview makes evident. I argued in Chapter One that oral history as a method has been particularly productive in enabling me to think through the physical object of the book, insistently present and emanating meaning within the situated space of the interview; and further, that oral history enables an examination of the relation between the body of the book and the reader. This in turn has led to reflection on embodiment within oral history praxis. Here, I suggest that oral history facilitates a discussion of time, reading and the book. Attention to reading as a temporal process contributes to a richer understanding both of queer time and of queer reading. The time-span of the interview, the historical moment at which it was recorded, the reflection on a narrator's past, and the ability to rewind, fast forward, and sample its audio iteration, or scan, search or select from a textual transcript, all have parallels with books and reading. The book is an emblem of duration, it represents a block of

time; it exists within time, it covers historical, imaginative, future, or speculative time, and in its reading can be reordered, recombined and returned to over a lifetime. Finally, attention to the mediality of the various outputs of the oral history interview – their status as 'in-between' researcher and narrator, sound and data, audio and text – has allowed me to reflect on the mediality of the book, as occupying a space between readers, between the actual and the imaginative, between the present, the past and the future time of reading still to come.

Conclusion
"Burning in my rucksack all the way home"

In the summer of 2018, I found myself, somewhat unexpectedly, in a late-night conversation with a bookshop. Or, more precisely, with the manager, Jim MacSweeney, and Uli Lenart, the assistant manager of Gay's The Word bookshop, in Bloomsbury, London – the UK's first, and for many years, only lesbian and gay bookshop, and still the only bookshop in England dedicated solely to queer literature. This exchange took place on Twitter, prompted by a discussion of the value of libraries to which I refer in Chapter Two. Jim recalls "visiting [his] local library in Kennington when [he] was starting to come out" (@gaystheword). If, he explained, "a novel looked 'too gay'", he would "check and see who was on the checkout before borrowing it" (@gaystheword). The fear of being himself 'read' as gay by a potentially hostile library staff member was deeply inhibiting to Jim at this time. "I could go into gay bars which was fine as everyone there was gay," he explains, "but to borrow a gay title in a library was outing yourself" (@gaystheword). It is a felicitous linguistic and conceptual kinship, to take a book *out*, to be himself *out*ed, but one that has come to seem familiar in investigating what I described in the Introduction to this thesis as the complex relations and *reciprocities* between LGBTQ individuals, books and the act of reading.

Threaded through this conversation was a parallel discussion with Uli, who ventured that he, too, used public libraries as a teenager coming to an understanding of his emerging sexuality. Our conversation was shaped by the medium in which it took place, but, for ease of reading, I excerpt it here as a continuous piece of prose. Uli recalls taking out a specific book, Paul Monette's 1992 memoir *Becoming a Man*:

> I was just drawn to the image of a beautiful, self-possessed man with an originality of bearing on the cover [...] it was v much implicit visual signification underscored by the title which spoke to me on a more empathetic conscious level. Felt v charged & self-conscious about taking it to the desk. Knew doing that would be on record & reveal a secret I knew I had but didn't fully

> comprehend [...] Was aware, perhaps from media at the time, about serial killers' library records used as evidence, that material I took out would be recorded. I remember being very conscious of that. But I still went up to the desk took it out and hid it burning in my rucksack all the way home [...] I guess it was one of the first 'rebellious' acts of my life. Taking that book out, reading it, marked a moment of divergence from the person i was expected to be and who I really was. What that book partly revealed to me was who I really was. Big stuff (@gaystheword)

Jim and Uli's stories are emblematic of the complex interleavings of book and reader that unfold throughout *Textual Preferences*. To be compelled by both unconscious and conscious factors, to attend both to image and paratext – the "implicit visual signification underscored by the title" – these reading practices are by now familiar in LGBTQ narratives of experiences-with-books and reading. Jim tells me that he was "embarrassed to want to read some titles [...] with tacky covers" (@gaystheword). Later, he sends me an example of just such a cover by direct message (fig. 9). "Literary snobbery I suppose," he adds (@gaystheword). It is reminiscent of Mark, explaining to me that he doesn't read "junk"; he has "never gone out and bought, you know, some of those terrible books that you see on the shelves in Prowler". Like Amy and Andy, Jim connects his navigation of paratext and intertext with that of the library space, telling me that "weren't gay sections in the 80s so if you borrowed a book which was gay you'd check and see if they'd published anything else and get that out" (@gaystheword). Uli further reflects on the correspondences between the book-object and himself as a reading subject, explaining that, in taking out *this* book, he would be logging, registering, not only the *practical* aspects of book-borrowing, but something far more profound about his own selfhood. Like Jim, and like Tony Openshaw in Salford Public Library, Uli, too, felt that the librarian would 'know' he was gay. The book's potential to create, charge and delimit space is expressed in the dual use of the term "conscious", in Uli's account. He is at first "conscious" of the book's title, which "spoke" to him; later, he is "conscious" that taking the book out would be recorded against his name, feeling it to be somehow incriminating. The metaphorical, private, psychic space

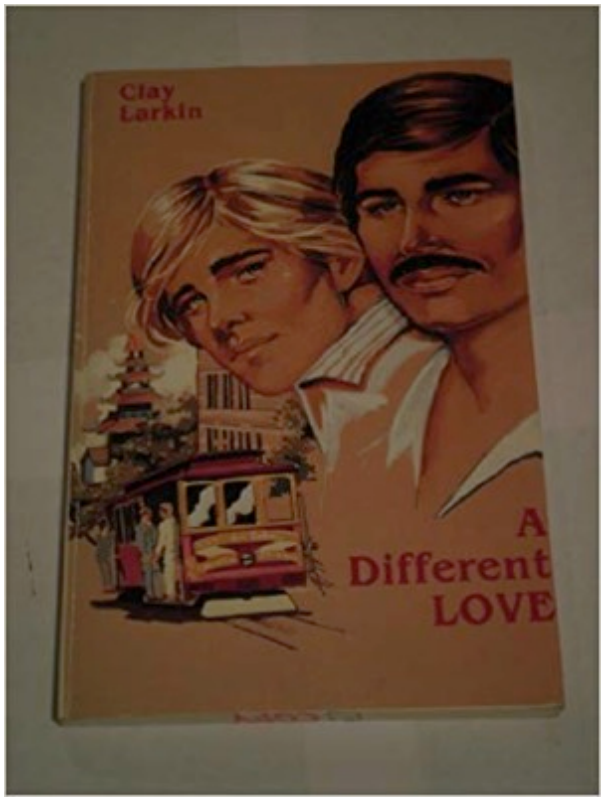


Fig. 9. Clay Larkin's *A Different Love: A Gay Romance* (Alyson Publications, 1983) – an example of a book with the kind of "tacky cover" that Jim was "embarrassed to want to read" (@gaystheword); *Twitter,* 25 July 2018, 11:24 p.m., twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1022246308793475072.

opened by the book in relation to his own self-conception is in tension with the way the book affects his movements and his social status within the space of the library.

In the final part of Uli's narrative, aspects of the haptic and bodily response to books explored in the first chapter of this thesis recur. Uli tweets a photo, an image of Monette's book; the cover is creased and worn, bearing traces of its handling (fig. 10). He describes it as "burning in his rucksack"; hot with shame, perhaps, or 'hot' as in stolen; the book as evidence to be used against him. It is a vivid reminder of Alice reading Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and finding it "almost [...] hot to touch". We finish our Twitter conversation with a broader reflection on the significance of Uli's encounter with Monette's memoir. Memories of reading and experiences-with-books that could so easily have remained unarticulated, triggered by something as slight as an adjacently themed Twitter thread, on reflection emerge as deeply significant temporal markers in his life-story. They signify rebellion, "divergence" from (heteronormative) societal expectation; they demonstrate to Uli "who [he] really was". They are, in short,

nothing short of formative for the establishment of his queer selfhood. As Uli himself comments, "Big stuff". It is, I reply, "[t]he biggest" (@pykelets).

As I have shown throughout *Textual Preferences*, there are distinct and vital uses of books and reading for LGBTQ individuals in childhood and adolescence. These personal accounts of reading and experiences-with-books are often revealed – often *only* revealed – through one-to-one conversation about memories of reading and experiences-with-books, whether in the context of the situated oral history interview, as I argue throughout this thesis, or, as here, in the brief but sustained digital flurries sparked by contemporary social media practices: reply, like, like, reply, direct message. These rich repositories for historians of reading and sexuality often cluster around certain themes, which *Textual Preferences* has aimed to unfold and to analyse. Jim and Uli's narratives, separately and together, contribute to this discussion, elegantly condensing and compressing many of the issues which appear in the reading histories and memories of my ten narrators, and in the adjacent archival sources, oral historical and otherwise, mined for this study. Engaging with their recollections allowed me to triangulate them with the several memories of reading I had gathered through other means, and marked a kind of saturation point for my research. The book that, 'burning' with illicit promise, had to be hidden from view; the equivalences between being *out* and taking a book out of the library; the attention paid to cover and paratext; the book's ability to make legible to the reader an as yet not fully comprehended 'secret' about their own life; and its marking of a point of divergence in a life narrative, a reorienting or restarting of the clock - these themes resonate throughout this study. I open with Jim and Uli here partly as a kind of opening out of the work of *Textual Preferences*, their provocation to look towards the many other as yet unshared and unexplored LGTBQ reading histories, memories and rich archives – Twitter's microhistories being a prime example – and partly as an affirmation of the work of this

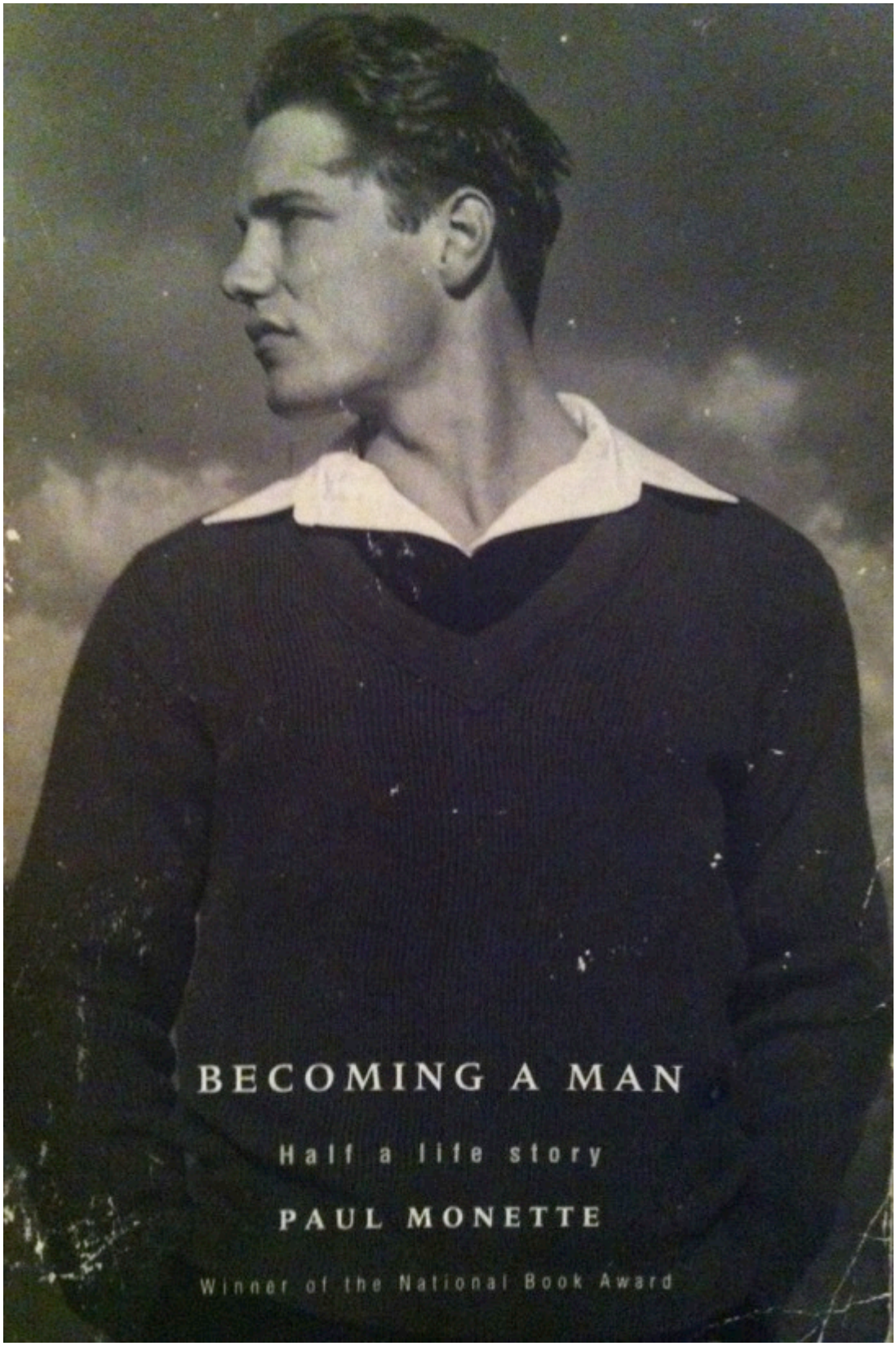


Fig. 10. Paul Monette's 1992 *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*, in the 1994 Abacus edition, as borrowed by sixteen-year-old Uli from his public library. Uli recalls being "drawn to the image of a beautiful, self-possessed man with an originality of bearing on the cover" (@gaystheword); *Twitter*, 25 July 2018, 9:55 p.m., twitter.com/gaystheword/status/1022223934937288704.

thesis thus far, a reminder to the reader of its salient points: the critical uses of books and reading for LGBTQ individuals in childhood and adolescence.

As Uli's story demonstrates, a revelatory encounter with a particular book works on more levels than the textual: it is materially, spatially and temporally significant also. Uli's teenage engagement with Monette's *Becoming a Man* provided the necessary conditions for his queer subjectivity to emerge; for his queer future to begin. *Textual Preferences* shows that books make meanings for my narrators in all kinds of ways, including but not limited to those made by the words on the page. It argues that LGBTQ histories and memories of reading are valuable for what they reveal about reading as bodily, haptic and gestural. Further, it positions book and reader as engaged in a continual, mutually constitutive dance of definition, examining their interactions within private and public, metaphorical and physical reading spaces. Though my narrators' memories of reading, their various reading practices and processes are analysed to show that queer reading is a more complex set of behaviours than is often understood by the concept of *queering.* It includes paratextual, subtextual and intertextual engagements with books of all kinds. Lastly, this thesis contributes to current thinking about book-use and time, investigating the ways in which my narrators construct and complicate reading histories and memories of various degrees of linearity, and how they use the material object of the book to intervene in and circumvent the more conventional time signatures of the narratives they consume, or recall consuming in childhood and adolescence.

Throughout *Textual Preferences,* my ten narrators contribute their various memories of books and reading – bookended by more in-depth discussions of a corpus of key texts they reread as part of our conversations – to create a mesh of examples of readerly behaviours, practices, and examples of book-use, with particular resonance for LGBTQ readers. In illustrating the often very material and situated reciprocities between books and readers, this thesis shows both how my narrators formulate their

queer selfhoods through books and reading, and how they in turn shelve, handle, use, browse, find, read and return to books. *Textual Preferences* positions oral history as a rich and productive methodology for book historians, historians of reading and of sexuality. Further, it intervenes in oral history praxis itself, to suggest that oral historians might benefit from paying increased attention to the nonverbal and paraverbal aspects of the oral history interview, and to *sound* and the voice rather than merely the voice-as-data. Featuring the unmistakably papery audio incursions of pages being flicked and rifled through, the snap-shut of a cardboard cover, the thump of a weighty paperback on a table, the interviews gathered as part of this study position books and reading as strange and complicated; as, in many ways, *queer*.

Perhaps, however, one of the most important contributions made through this study of LGTBQ adults' reading histories is not so much that my narrators variously – Kate on Gavin Maxwell, Carol on Louisa May Alcott, Andy on Kenneth Grahame – substantiate distinctly queer readings of certain books more commonly encountered in childhood, aligning with interpretations otherwise either ringfenced by literary criticism or marginalised in fringe media such as 'slash' fanfiction, but that they demonstrate these queer readings as resonating through time, from childhood into adolescence into adulthood. From the earliest precognitions of something 'comfortable' about a homosocial environment, for example, to the complex unpicking of layers of occlusion from a memoirist determined to conceal a core facet of his own self, it is the readings put forward by these LGBTQ adults *throughout their lives*, from childhood onwards, which enable a richer and more nuanced understanding of the various ways queerness and literature intersect. Listening to readers narrate their experiences-with-books and reading facilitates the emergence of such contributions.

This brings me to the final theme I want to explore. The oral histories gathered here represent the reading histories and memories of two generations – precisely the two generations who have shaped first gay and lesbian studies, then queer studies,

who have lived through the decriminalisation of homosexuality between men over 21, the rise of gay liberation after Stonewall, the AIDS crisis, the imposition and repeal of Section 28, the Equalities Act 2010, the introduction of civil partnership and same-sex marriage. Yet while their various interactions and encounters with the books that shaped them have remained largely unexamined, a crucial part of the queer history of twentieth century Britain has stayed hidden. This project could only have been approached in retrospect. In the twenty-first century, the cultural and publishing landscape in relation to LGBTQ content is changing. Despite recent concerning pushback on LGBTQ issues in the education sector – for example, the protests outside primary schools in Birmingham over their decision to teach the LGBT-inclusive No Outsiders programme – it is now entirely possible that, for the LGBTQ adult readers of the future, memories of reading in childhood and adolescence will be informed by picturebooks, Middle Grade books, Young Adult fiction, plus a range of cultural, multimedia and digital sources undreamt of by my narrators during their own childhoods, which model LGBTQ representation of various kinds. Representation has always been a significant aspect of the way readers have been able to construct their identities, but the material gathered as part of this study demonstrates from multiple perspectives the many and various ways in which readers have 'wrested' meaning from the resources available to them: materially, spatially, temporally. In so doing, these memories and histories of reading and experiences-with-books can tell us much about how books and reading work; much that may be more specific to the time and place of their reading than (I, at least) previously considered.

Books are, for many of my narrators, nothing short of life-saving. Jo is clear that "I owe my life to books". She explains, "when I read now how high the suicide rates are for young trans people, you know. Terrifying. That never occurred to me as a possibility when I was growing up. Because I was reading. I'm convinced that books kept me alive." Alice suggests that books "probably helped me survive the environment

I was in". Carol states that reading "really was my salvation. As in, mental health salvation" – a "refuge" from and a remedy for her "incredibly difficult" family life: "living opposite the library saved me, really. Completely saved me." As so often, the themes that emerge in my narrators' accounts are twined through theoretical and critical positions on the significance of books and reading for LGBTQ individuals. Donna Allegra, like Katherine Forrest – for whom, as discussed, Ann Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* was elementally important – reports needing lesbian-themed books "the way I needed food and shelter for survival" (72). For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in "Queer and Now", attachment to particular "cultural objects", including, perhaps especially, books, became "a prime resource for survival" (3). Sedgwick avers the very survival of her "adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work" as "a miracle", with a narrative culture of its own: "[e]veryone who survived has stories about how it was done" (1). Lee Lynch, in her essay "Cruising the Libraries", similarly questions whether her reading practice is a "long, deeply ingrained habit – or has it become an instinct for survival?" (42-3). Positioning reading as life-saving implies a continuous and continually necessary process, in which no single text can guarantee the ultimate safety of the reading subject or the cessation of the potentially harsh conditions under which they exist. It is the practice of reading and the ongoing relationship with the book as material object that has secured and continues to facilitate for my narrators a viable future.

Lynn Abrams reminds the oral historian that "what starts out as a personal exchange, a private conversation, becomes a public statement or a text which is open to various interpretations and even may be transformed into another genre altogether such as a scholarly article", or, indeed, a thesis (25). As a last methodological reflection I want to outline some improvements that could be made to the planning and design of the initial, interpersonal exchanges from which *Textual Preferences* was formulated, to

the public statement(s) and text(s) this project has produced – its archive of audio and transcripts – and to its transfigured state in the form of this thesis.

I discussed in the Introduction my use of the terms cis and trans, but my relative lack of focus on nonbinary, genderfluid or genderqueer identities. In any future oral history work with LGBTQ narrators, I would give more consideration to these gender identities. In practical terms, I would aim to clarify my narrators' preferred pronouns either before the interview, or as an initial question, and would also state my own preferred pronouns (she/her), either in our introductory conversation before beginning recording, or at the outset of the interview. Relatedly, I would put more time and resources into recruiting bisexual and trans masculine participants, if I were to conduct this project again. I also mentioned the relative lack of diversity among my narrators in racial, ethnic, class-based and professional terms – this could be given more attention at the outset of future projects.

I would, given increased time and resources, have produced full interview summaries as well as transcripts. Summarising is a skilful and time-consuming task in itself, and although I produced cover sheets with basic biographical information about each narrator, the practical details of the interview (date and time of recording; duration; setting), as well as a full list of authors and titles discussed – deftly enabled by the support of oral historian Alison Chand – I prioritised producing full transcripts over adding more complete summaries of each interview. Additionally, I would have liked to explore further the multimedia potential of creating and writing about an audio archive, perhaps by having embedded audio into the body of this thesis, alongside extracts from transcripts, in order that readers might listen to clips from interviews alongside reading the excerpts quoted in these pages. As it stands, readers are directed to Appendix 3 which provides cataloguing information for the *Textual Preferences* archive and directions for how to access its audio and textual elements (according to my narrators' stipulations).

In terms of my analysis, a perhaps more conventional approach to the texts under discussion might have been to combine critical and close readings of the fourteen works that made up my narrators' corpus, using their reflections as an additional source with which to propose new readings of the texts under discussion. While I put this into practice at points throughout *Textual Preferences*, the very nature of the research and the conclusions drawn meant that methodological and material concerns overtook these more text-based preoccupations. However, there is, I think, more work that could be done in this area, and memories of books and reading can inform more theoretical and critical text-based approaches in important ways, as I hope to have demonstrated. Lastly, I would like to have explored in more detail the performative elements of my narrators' conversations with me – the moments, when, in service of their narrative or in marking discomfort or discomposure, their *telling* of the story emerged in notable or interesting ways. For example, Alice, describing her childhood, often slips into second person, raising her voice in pitch and lowering it in volume, making various asides or interjections which create a kind of parallel narrative. Jo, too, frequently employs dramatic pauses, effects and humour as a kind of ironic distancing. Alongside this, I would have liked to have conducted a more in depth analysis of gaps and silences across the whole span of my interviews, to really interrogate those moments when my narrators, in *not speaking* were in fact conveying crucial information. These issues have been touched on throughout this thesis but there is certainly more that could be done to develop this work.

Queer historiography suggests that it is necessary to know the past before we can imagine the future; this plays out on a very personal level too. Reading LGBTQ pasts through memories and histories of experiences-with-books and reading allows for the kind of "genealogical claiming" referenced in the Introduction to this thesis (Nealon qtd. in Rohy 152). It allows my narrators to put on record the various stories of their becoming, and to be made visible and legible in the present; contributing to the

Textual Preferences archive allows them to inscribe their present for readers to come. The research carried out as part of this study so far opens up several opportunities for further work. Two interrelated areas in particular would repay further attention. It has become increasingly clear that libraries hold stories which proliferate beyond the classified and shelved. In these accounts, hands shake and hearts pound, books are to be possessed, card catalogues made to yield; there is fear, pain, embarrassment, guilt and lust, shame and secrecy. But for every locked room, reserved stock list or borrowed library card, there are those committed to upholding the library – and the public library, in particular – as a democratic, free, civic space: the "heroic librarians" recalled by poet Sophie Mayer in Ali Smith's *Public Library and Other Stories* (2015), who displayed work by queer authors in the "small suburban library" of her childhood "even after the passage of Section 28" (75-76). Libraries also hold stories of connection, community, resistance, affirmation and recognition. Firstly, I propose a history of reading under Section 28. This would be a more fully developed project on queerness and the library, specifically, the UK public library in the years 1988 to 2003, which could develop some of the reflections and memories captured in Chapter Two in fruitful directions, to recover positive and negative memories of reading and experiences-with-books from library users, alongside those of librarians and teachers. Secondly, I would like to draw on recent work in the history of emotions to explore more fully the non-verbal and paraverbal aspects of reading and experiences-with-books: the ways those emotions listed above, alongside joy, hope, humour, boredom and sadness, intersect with and are present within memories of books and reading.

Beyond this, capturing and analysing reading histories which probe still further at the intersections between books, reading and queer identities could take many future forms. Speaking with different constituencies – in terms of self-identification, age, or race, for example – would yield different and valuable results. Using oral history as a method for bringing LGBTQ lived experience and queer theoretical approaches

into dialogue could also be productively applied to memories of and experiences with other artforms: film, music and visual art. *Textual Preferences*, as adjacent to the Memories of Fiction project, contributes to existing work on book history, histories of reading, and interviewing; I suggest also that there is further work to be done on the intersections between oral history and media theory, particularly in relation to the non-verbal and paraverbal elements of the oral history interview (for example, the 'noisy book' from Chapter One). Finally, of course, the *Textual Preferences* archive exists as a resource for future research, which may or may not take books and reading as its focus (just as I mined existing oral history archives for those themes, though they did not in themselves focus on these topics).

Oral history, suggests Alessandro Portelli, *floats* "in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer, and melting and coalescing in the no-man's land from orality to writing and back" (vii). It is a peculiarly apt description for a study that has examined how memories of textual (and more materially situated and bookish) encounters present verbally; how *talking* about books and reading reveals certain key aspects of the process of reading and engaging with books; and how those aspects might then 'coalesce' back into the written form before you here, as *Textual Preferences* itself. Portelli's emphasis on oral history's occupation of the state *between* the 'present' and the 'ever-changing' past is again methodologically linked to that of the historian working with *memories* of reading, considering how these memories are continually, actively reshaped and reformed in the present. I think again of Mary Jacobus's observation that reading "involves the double time of rereading and remembering" (53).

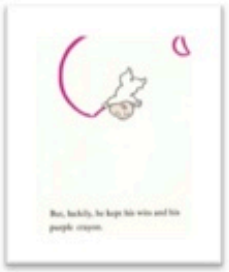
What has made this research so exciting has been the opportunity to excavate at the very edges of the ever-shifting boundaries between childhood and adulthood, self and other, and the changing conceptions of selfhood over time; to dredge up those

"energies, incredulities, and discoveries of [...] earlier moment[s] of passionate, incompetent reading and recognition", as Sedgwick puts it in her introduction to *Novel Gazing* – in full awareness of the anachronistic, messy, inherently queer nature of the exercise (31).

Tugging in adulthood at these threads from 'earlier moments' of reading and experiences-with-books has been a fascinating exercise; one that seems to have the potential to be limitlessly generative and compelling. However, projects require parameters, and I have attempted to restrict, marshal and shape my material productively. And yet, "inherent to the fascination and frustration of oral history", Portelli observes, is a "sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress" (vii). This seems an appropriate note on which to conclude. While this is the end point of a sometimes fragmentary, sometimes sustained engagement with a series of ideas over the last several years, it is at the same time a beginning; an opportunity and an entry for future scholars to contribute to the body of (queer) knowledge in ways I am unable to predict. *Textual Preferences* would not exist without the care, space, attention and time given freely by my ten narrators, who so generously shared something of their adult selves, their teenage selves, and of their child selves with me. It has been revelatory, and I thank them for it. It strikes me in writing these final words that these four qualities could stand in for the themes of *Textual Preferences*'s four chapters. They could, also, characterise my narrators' relationships with books and reading, and the vital role they play in the shaping of queer selfhood. In summation, then, of the investments made in childhood and adolescent books and reading by LGBTQ adult readers, and of what books can offer in return – as well as and alongside their various, specific textual pleasures – I suggest the following: *care*, *space*, *attention*, *time*. Resonating over a reading life, these are the queer afterlives of childhood reading.

Appendix 1: Flyer for recruitment

University of Roehampton
London



Were you a childhood bookworm?

Can you remember what you read as a child or teenager? | Do you identify as LGBTQ? | Are you in your thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, or older?

I am looking for self-identified LGBTQ adults, born no later than 1982, who would like to be interviewed as part of an oral history project on LGBTQ adults' memories of childhood reading. Participants may have grown up in the UK or elsewhere but should have been reading primarily in English. Interviews will be audio-recorded (not filmed) and can be made anonymous if requested. Interviews will last approximately 2 hours and will take place from March 2015. I am based in Cambridge, UK, but I am happy to travel.

Following the initial interview, participants will be invited to take part in an optional follow up activity – re-reading a book from childhood or adolescence and reflecting on that experience in an additional individual interview. Again, interviews will be audio-recorded.

About my research
The genre of the 'reading memoir' has proliferated in recent years, with various writers revisiting the books that have had the most impact on them, telling the stories of their own lives through the literature they have loved. Anecdotally, this drive persists also among LGBTQ readers – ever wondered, for example, why you were so drawn to George from the *Famous Five*, or whether Jo March from *Little Women* grew up to be a lesbian?

However, little scholarly attention has been paid to LGBTQ adults' memories of childhood reading, and to the ways in which children who grew up to be LGBTQ, finding themselves under-represented, may have read *into* or *against* the books they consumed in childhood. These readers may have felt an affinity, perhaps barely articulated, with certain characters or episodes they encountered. They may have been highly attuned to subtext. They may have mentally 'edited' some characters out altogether. This study aims to find out more about the books that shape us, and how we shape them in return.

About me
I have recently begun my doctoral research at the University of Roehampton, as part of the AHRC-funded project Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories. For more about the project, visit **memoriesoffiction.org**. Before returning to academia full-time I worked for 10 years in various communications roles in NGOs and human rights organisations. I have always loved to read (and re-read) and have never found a good reason to stop reading children's books.

Formal ethical approval has been sought from the University of Roehampton and will be in place before the interviews begin. **If you're interested in taking part, have any questions, or would just like a chat and to find out more, please drop me a line – I'd love to hear from you.**

Email: **pykes@roehampton.ac.uk**
Twitter: **@SarahNotMaureen**
Mobile: **07812 357370**

Thank you for reading,

Sarah

PS If you like this flyer and know somewhere you could stick it up or distribute it, please drop me a line with your postal address and I would be delighted to send you some copies! Alternatively I could also send you a soft copy by email.

I produced and distributed this flyer by email and in hard copy, to the following organisations and at the following events:

Gay's the Word (LGBTQ bookshop); Green Carnation Prize (annual literary prize for LGBT writers); Lines of Dissent conference (LGBTQ Archives and History 12th annual conference, London Metropolitan Archives, 6 December 2014); Manchester Lesbian and Gay Foundation; Ms/representation: Mass Media and Feminisms in Historical Context conference (Society for the History of Women in the Americas 7th annual conference, University of Westminster, 29 November 2014); Mind Yourself (LGBT group for the London Irish community); Opening Doors (community organisation for older LGBT people); Pink Ink (LGBTQ creative writing group run by counselling service London Friend); Polari (London-based literary gay salon); Speak Out London (LGBT oral history project).

Appendix 2: Sample participant consent form and Oral History Recording Agreement

University of Roehampton London

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Affinity, resistance, identity: The textual and extratextual afterlives of childhood reading for LGBTQ adults

Main study: from March 2015

Brief Description of Research Project

The genre of the 'reading memoir' has proliferated in recent years, with various writers revisiting the books that have had the most impact on them, telling the stories of their own lives through the literature they have loved. Anecdotally, this drive persists also among LGBTQ readers – ever wondered, for example, why you were so drawn to George from the *Famous Five*, or whether Jo March from *Little Women* grew up to be a lesbian?

However, little scholarly attention has been paid to LGBTQ adults' memories of childhood reading, and to the ways in which children who grew up to be LGBTQ, finding themselves under-represented, may have read *into* or *against* the books they consumed in childhood. These readers may have felt an affinity, perhaps barely articulated, with certain characters or episodes they encountered. They may have been highly attuned to subtext. They may have mentally 'edited' some characters out altogether. This study aims gather oral histories from self-identified LGBTQ adults, born no later than 1982, who would like to be interviewed about their memories of childhood reading, in order to find out more about the books that shape us, and how we shape them in return.

What Participation Involves:

Participation will involve an interview of approximately one to two hours in duration, which will take place in a location of the participant's choosing. Interviews often take place in participants' homes, but could take place in a library, at the University of Roehampton or in another suitable, quiet and convenient location. The interviews are audio recorded, not filmed, and can be made anonymous if requested. The audio recording and transcripts will be preserved as a permanent reference resource by the University of Roehampton and Wandsworth Heritage Service for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and the internet (unless you wish to limit access or use in any way, which you can specify on the Recording Agreement form). Usually one person is interviewed at a time, by one interviewer. Please let me know if you'd like alternative arrangements.

Following the initial interviews, you will be invited to take part in an optional follow up activity. This will entail rereading a particular book recalled during the individual interview, and reflecting on that experience in a further individual interview conducted by the investigator. Again, this interview will be audio recorded. You are free to decline to participate in this follow up activity.

Investigator Contact Details:

Name: Sarah Pyke
Department: National Centre for Research into Children's Literature, English and Creative Writing Department
Address: Digby Stuart, University of Roehampton, London SW15 5PU
Email: pykes@roehampton.ac.uk
Phone: 07812 357370

Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason, including during the interview, or by contacting the investigator and informing them of my wish to withdraw from the project after the interview has taken place. If I do withdraw, I understand that my data might still be used and published in an aggregated form. I understand that if I request anonymity, the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator, my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings, and that data will be collected and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University's Data Protection Policy.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

If you prefer to remain anonymous, please check the box: ☐

If you would like to choose a pseudonym under which your data will appear, please indicate your preferred pseudonym below, or agree this at a later date by following up directly with the investigator:

.....

Information for Participants:

Please feel free to discuss with the investigator any concerns that may arise as a result of participation. Should you feel the need for external support there are a range of groups you may contact, including:
PACE (020 7700 1323 or www.pacehealth.org.uk)
London Friend (020 7837 3337 or londonfriend.org.uk)
London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (0300 330 0630 or www.llgs.org.uk)
The Samaritans (08457 909090 or www.samaritans.org)

If you have concerns about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator (or if the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies.) However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department.

Director of Studies Contact Details: **Head of Department Contact Details:**

Dr Lisa Sainsbury
Digby Stuart,
University of Roehampton,
London SW15 5PU

l.sainsbury@roehampton.ac.uk
020 8392 3815

Dr Laura Peters
Digby Stuart,
University of Roehampton,
London SW15 5PU

l.peters@roehampton.ac.uk
020 8392 3577

Research project: 'Affinity, resistance, identity: The textual and extratextual afterlives of childhood reading for LGBTQ adults'
Investigator contact details: Sarah Pyke
Department of English and Creative Writing
University of Roehampton
pykes@roehampton.ac.uk
07812 357370

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING AGREEMENT

Recordings of oral histories are integral to the project, 'Affinity, resistance, identity: The textual and extratextual afterlives of childhood reading for LGBTQ adults', which is itself part of the wider project 'Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories'. Your recorded interview will become part of the collection cared for by Wandsworth Heritage Service and the University of Roehampton, where it will be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and the internet. The purpose of this Agreement is to ensure that your contribution is added to the collections of Wandsworth Heritage Service and the University of Roehampton in strict accordance with your wishes.

This Agreement is made between Wandsworth Heritage Service, Battersea Library, 265 Lavender Hill, SW11 1JB, and the University Library, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5SZ, ("the Libraries") and you ("the Participant", "I"):

Your name:.....

Your address:.....

in regard to the recorded interview/s which took place on:

Date/s:.....

Declaration: I, the Participant, confirm that I consented to take part in the recording, and hereby assign to the Libraries all copyright in my contribution for use in all and any media. I understand that this will not affect my moral right to be identified as the 'performer' in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

If you do not wish to assign your copyright to the Libraries, or you wish to limit public access to your contribution for a period of years, or to remain anonymous, or to restrict its use in any other way, please state these conditions here:

…….....

.....
This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with English law and the jurisdiction of the English courts.

Both parties shall, by signing below, indicate acceptance of the Agreement.

By or on behalf of the Participant:

Signed:.....

Name in block capitals: .....Date: .....

On behalf of Wandsworth Heritage Service and the University of Roehampton:

Signed:…….....

Name in block capitals: .....Date: .....

Office use only:		
Full name:	Acc.no.:	Series title:

Each participant completed the above paperwork, which is archived digitally as part of the *Textual Preferences* archive at the University of Roehampton (see Appendix 3).

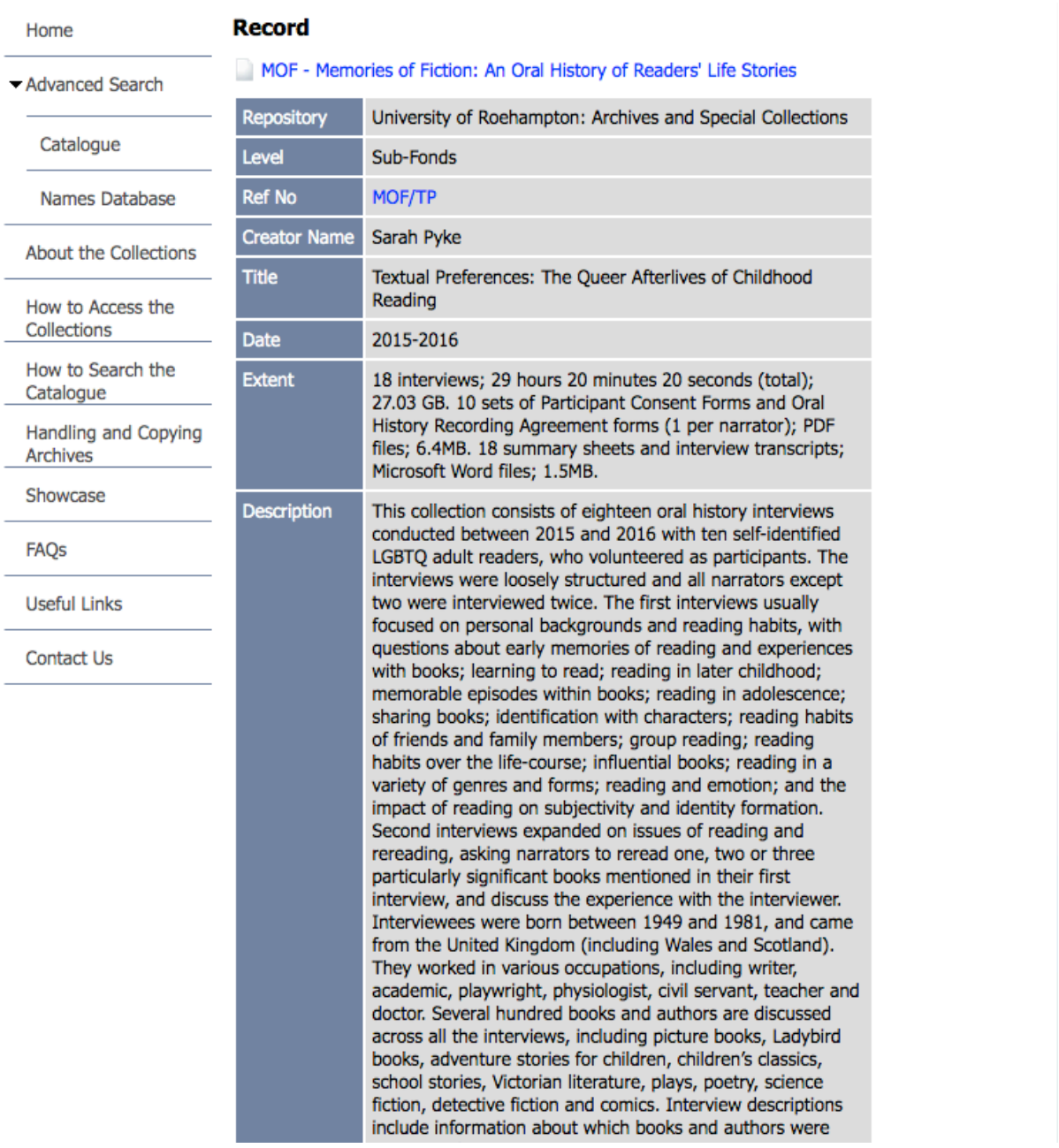
The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference ECW 14/ 010 in the Department of English and Creative Writing and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee on 3 February 2015. I submitted a Minor Amendment form on 24 February 2015; this was approved on 26 February 2015 under the reference ECW 14/ 010.

Appendix 3: The *Textual Preferences* archive

The *Textual Preferences* archive is catalogued in the University of Roehampton's Archives and Special Collections:

calmview.roehampton.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MOF%2FTP

A screenshot of the catalogue record is below.



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MOF - Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories

Repository	University of Roehampton: Archives and Special Collections
Level	Sub-Fonds
Ref No	MOF/TP
Creator Name	Sarah Pyke
Title	Textual Preferences: The Queer Afterlives of Childhood Reading
Date	2015-2016
Extent	18 interviews; 29 hours 20 minutes 20 seconds (total); 27.03 GB. 10 sets of Participant Consent Forms and Oral History Recording Agreement forms (1 per narrator); PDF files; 6.4MB. 18 summary sheets and interview transcripts; Microsoft Word files; 1.5MB.
Description	This collection consists of eighteen oral history interviews conducted between 2015 and 2016 with ten self-identified LGBTQ adult readers, who volunteered as participants. The interviews were loosely structured and all narrators except two were interviewed twice. The first interviews usually focused on personal backgrounds and reading habits, with questions about early memories of reading and experiences with books; learning to read; reading in later childhood; memorable episodes within books; reading in adolescence; sharing books; identification with characters; reading habits of friends and family members; group reading; reading habits over the life-course; influential books; reading in a variety of genres and forms; reading and emotion; and the impact of reading on subjectivity and identity formation. Second interviews expanded on issues of reading and rereading, asking narrators to reread one, two or three particularly significant books mentioned in their first interview, and discuss the experience with the interviewer. Interviewees were born between 1949 and 1981, and came from the United Kingdom (including Wales and Scotland). They worked in various occupations, including writer, academic, playwright, physiologist, civil servant, teacher and doctor. Several hundred books and authors are discussed across all the interviews, including picture books, Ladybird books, adventure stories for children, children's classics, school stories, Victorian literature, plays, poetry, science fiction, detective fiction and comics. Interview descriptions include information about which books and authors were

	discussed for more than twenty seconds. Main themes (i.e., themes that were discussed in more than five interviews) include reading, books, libraries, childhood, education, family, religion, social class, memory, emotion, gender, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities. Interviews vary in length from 28 minutes 10 seconds to 2 hours 28 minutes 5 seconds, with an average length of 1 hour 37 minutes 48 seconds.
Language	English
Physical Description	WAV format; interviews were recorded on a Marantz recorder. PDF format (forms). Microsoft Word format (summary sheets and transcripts).
Administrative History	This collection of interviews with ten self-identified LGBTQ narrators asks each narrator to reflect on their memories of books and reading in childhood and adolescence. Reading, and experiences-with-books more broadly, have been identified as particularly germane to the construction of queer identities by a variety of critics and writers. Robert Dessaix, Alison Hennegan, Philip Kennicott, Eve Sedgwick, Andrew Solomon and Kath Weston, among others, have written of critically important, self-fashioning encounters with books in childhood and adolescence. Valerie Rohy notes that, in the face of historic queer invisibility and lack of representation, "reading takes on a special urgency". In order to interrogate this intriguing intersection between books, reading and queer identity in more depth, first interviews were followed for eight out of ten narrators by second interviews which focused on rereading specific books, to find out more about re-encountering an important text (or book) from childhood or adolescence in adulthood. This project aimed to animate and articulate not only the hard-to-recover traces of reading as a practice – one which is social as well as private – but also the nontextual uses to which the book is put. Books, in these oral histories, shape their readers. They are also shaped in turn – not only by the physical wear and tear of reading and rereading, but by the multiple interpretive and affective demands made on them. The various "paracanons", to use Catharine Stimpson's term – private, personal canons specific to each narrator – recalled and reassembled by these ten LGBTQ individuals constitute a queer reading history which is both oral and material, tangible and intangible. This data informed a doctoral study, which focused on the object of the book, reading spaces, ways of queer reading and queer reading in time. The project's findings will be of interest to future researchers interested in the intersections between queer oral history, histories of reading, history of the book, and children's literature studies. These interviews were

	conducted as part of a doctoral project entitled Textual Preferences: The Queer Afterlives of Childhood Reading.
Access Status	Open access, unless specified
Access Conditions	Open for research at University of Roehampton Archives and Special Collections for 25 years beginning in 2019; electronic media requires ability to read WAV or MP3 files.
Copyright	Copyright Wandsworth Heritage Service, 2015. Requests to reproduce or publish material from this collection should be directed to archives@roehampton.ac.uk
URL	https://memoriesoffiction.org/
URL Description	Project website; also, https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Memories-of-Fiction/

The archive consists of participant consent forms, Oral History Recording Agreement forms, cover sheets and transcripts, and audio files (MP3 and WAV) for each of the eighteen interviews I carried out as part of this study, with clear instructions about access restrictions given in the file names.

Name of narrator	***Participant consent form***	***Oral History Recording Agreement***	***Interview 1***		***Interview 2***	
			Cover sheet and transcript	***Audio (hh:mm:ss)***	***Cover sheet and transcript***	***Audio (hh:mm:ss)***
Alice	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	02:09:39 [Full clearance]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:34:06 [Full clearance]
Amy	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	02:14:28 [Full clearance]	✓ [Full clearance]	02:28:04 [Full clearance]
Andy	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	02:05:55 [Not for broadcast or online access]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:23:29 [Not for broadcast or online access]
Carol	✓	✓	✓ [Full	01:39:52 [Not for broadcast or online	✓ [Full	01:01:44 [Not for broadcast

			clearance]	access]	clearance]	or online access]
Eileen	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	02:00:12 [Full clearance]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:22:15 [Full clearance]
Jo	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	01:47:08 [Full clearance]		
Julia	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	01:24:51 [Full clearance]		
Kate	✓ [Closed]	✓ [Closed]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:49:13 [Closed]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:06:43 [Closed]
Mark	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	01:24:26 [Full clearance]	✓ [Full clearance]	00:28:10 [Full clearance]
Mary	✓	✓	✓ [Full clearance]	01:51:18 [Full clearance]	✓ [Full clearance]	01:28:49 [Full clearance]

These materials may be accessed by visiting the University of Roehampton. The cover sheets, transcripts and audio files (MP3 only) deposited in the archive may also be accessed via the USB drive attached to the hard copy of this thesis.

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